



Who's on our side?

By Graham Trainor Oregon AFL-CIO President

Lessons in a Time of Crisis

There is no question that the current economic and public health crisis is upending the lives of working Oregonians in every corner of our state. It gets worse by the day, and there is seemingly no end in sight to the pain and destruction being caused by this deadly, invisible virus. While some workers have the flexibility of working from home, so many more don't have that luxury and are still showing up to work despite the risks. And then there are the one in eight Oregonians that have lost their jobs during the coronavirus outbreak. More workers filed unemployment claims in the past few weeks than at any point during the peak of the Great Recession. Our state's economy, and our lives, have been upended in the most abrupt, unexpected way, leaving working Oregonians rightly concerned about their future and the economic stability of their families.

While this crisis retains its hold, we must continue to prioritize the health and safety of our members and all workers. Simultaneously, we must also begin to think about and plan for rebuilding our economy, communities, and workplaces

in stronger, more resilient ways. The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the gaps and the cracks in our social safety net and employment laws. It has started to shift society's perspective on the value and dignity of work, and has validated so much of what the labor movement has said for years: Our rigged economic system doesn't work for most of us. Economic inequality has worsened after every recession or major economic downturn in our history. Below are a few lessons which can help guide our collective preparation for rebuilding from this crisis with workers at the center of the discussion.

All work has dignity and value, and the everyday heroes helping us get through this dark, difficult time illustrate what the labor movement has said throughout its history.

- So many workers are still showing up to work and getting us through this difficult time by providing critical services that each and every one of us depend on. This reality should reshape the way society values and respects so many types of workers, especially those that are typi-

cally in the shadows.

The Labor Movement has always been the best and only line of defense for the working class.

- Oregon unions are on the front lines, fighting for members and all workers in this difficult time. It's what we do in the midst of any challenge, but it is especially on display today as the lives of working Oregonians are turned upside down.

Our social safety net and employment laws have always had gaps and cracks, and this is showcasing even more inadequacies in the critical services and protections that Oregonians rely on, especially in times of crisis.

- Whether it's a worker who loses their employer-based healthcare due to a layoff, a frontline worker without proper protective equipment risking exposure to the virus with no certainty of a workers' compensation system that will protect them if they endure long-term health impacts, or someone who has COVID symptoms but lacks access to paid sick days and the ability to stay home, these are just a few examples of gaps that need to be addressed.

Bold, swift leadership is vital in times of crisis. Economic inequality is also a crisis, and demands bold, swift leadership in good times and bad.

- Economic inequality was reaching record levels *before* this crisis took hold, and is continuing to leave people of color and women behind. Leaders must tackle the current crisis with this fact in mind,

and resist the notion of using this pandemic as justification for enacting policies that exacerbate inequality after this is behind us.

Our economy is a set of rules that can be rewritten. We have the power to change the rules to ensure that the post-COVID recovery does not make our economy even more unequal.

- Worker and community advocates have been fighting to make Oregon's economy more fair and just for years with some important successes and victories to show for it. In the months and years ahead, we must double down on our advocacy to ensure the post-COVID recovery doesn't leave behind working Oregonians, especially those that have traditionally been left behind by economic gains.

While this is an incredibly difficult time for workers and our movement, the generosity, compassion, and spirit of solidarity on display within and among Oregon's unions has remained a constant reminder to us all about the beauty of trade unionism and the importance of our work. I'm continually inspired by the commitment of Oregon's unions and know it is these acts of solidarity now, and as we rebuild Oregon's economy, that can lead to the structural changes Oregon workers deserve.

The Oregon AFL-CIO is a 138,000-member-strong federation of labor unions.



It's never been more critical to help keep workers safe and healthy.

Together, we can get through this.

Worker Memorial Day | April 28, 2020

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