



Who's on our side?

By Graham Trainor Oregon AFL-CIO President

Lives and livelihoods are counting on us

Three hundred thousand. Lost family members, frontline workers taken too soon, empty chairs for the holidays, communities devastated, hospitals quickly reaching and exceeding capacity. While we have much to be proud of and grateful for through it all, 2020 is coming to a close at one of the most dangerous times we've seen throughout the course of this pandemic. The winter surge and the trajectory of the virus comes as yet another blow during a year wrought with challenges.

We must stay grounded in the reality that workers continue to be unnecessarily exposed to the virus, that healthcare and essential workers continue to face impossible odds and grave danger every time they clock in and every time they return home to their families, that the havoc caused by the coronavirus didn't have to be this devastating, and that while vaccine distribution has begun, we still have much pain and suffering ahead of us before we're able to beat the virus.

All the while, there are a number of lessons that I am holding on to as we close out 2020 and move into a new year with the necessary focus and determination for the continuing struggles for worker safety, justice, and fairness.

Front line and essential workers have always been heroes. In the coming year, we must maintain this awareness by treating them like heroes, paying them like heroes, and protecting them like heroes.

The stability of working families within our economic system was fragile before, and it's even more fragile now. From housing and food insecurity to job insecurity made worse by this year's economic collapse, working people must be at the center of discussions in the Oregon Legislature and in the U.S. Congress as we rebuild from the devastation.

The pre-pandemic economy was insufferable for too many, especially workers of color and women. No one is interested in rebuilding what we had before. Instead, we must intentionally focus our actions on the need to reimagine our systems, our public safety net programs, and our worker protection laws to better meet the needs of all Oregon workers.

Working parents, especially working mothers, have been facing impossible choices as the pandemic rages on and schools remain closed. Teachers, school employees, working parents, and our

communities all have a stake in the safe reopening of our schools. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) just released a detailed, science-based "Plan to Safely Reopen American's Schools and Communities" that will be a critical roadmap for the future.

In such a fissured, precarious, and challenging economy, workers are often left with few champions, few fighters who are unwavering in their defense. Throughout this year, the labor movement has jumped into action during this difficult time, fighting to protect and defend all workers, not just union members, from the corporate greed and callousness we consistently see in times of crisis.

Along with these reminders and lessons, I am also remaining confident and hopeful about what working people will accomplish in the year ahead because of what we know and have always known about the power of organizing, solidarity, and resistance.

It is no coincidence that, based on a recent Gallup poll, union favorability is at a 50-year high during one of the most challenging years facing workers in recent memory. In the last few years, we have seen historic collective action from

coast to coast, and throughout 2020 the labor movement has been standing up and speaking out in the streets, in state capitols, and in Congress, as we hold the line for working people.

Further, following the historic election victories we saw on Nov. 3 and the impact the Oregon and national labor movements had on those outcomes, our collective power was, yet again, on full display.

And whether it was the autoworkers in the 1930s in Flint harnessing their power in the nation's first sitdown strike as they demanded an eight-hour workday or nurses and healthcare workers today demanding hazard pay and adequate PPE, when working people have come together throughout history with a common goal and a shared vision, there is nothing that can stop them.

In the new year, let's recommit ourselves to the struggle for justice, let's beat the virus, let's rebuild by centering working people, and let's continue to showcase the labor movement as an inclusive vehicle for change. Lives and livelihoods are counting on it.

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



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