TRADE

AFL-CIO applauds Biden pick for trade representative

President-elect Joe Biden has begun to say who he intends to appoint to cabinet and other high-level posts. On Dec. 10, he announced Katherine Tai as his pick for U.S. Trade Representative (USTR). USTR is the official who advises the president on trade policy and leads trade negotiations with other countries.

Katherine Tai

Back in 2003, Biden as a U.S. Senator voted for the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Union leaders have been watching closely to see if he'll break with the NAFTA-style trade policies pursued by presidents Clinton, Bush I and II, and Obama.

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said Tai's appointment is a stark departure from those failed policies. As chief trade counsel for the House Ways and Means Committee the last two years, Tai helped push the Trump Administration to add enforceable labor rights to the agreement with Mexico and Canada that replaced NAFTA. Before that, she spent seven years as an attorney for the USTR specializing in enforcing trade agreements with China.

"With Tai as the U.S. trade representative, we will be strongly positioned to advance a fair trade agenda that makes the world safer and workers stronger," Trumka said. "But make no mistake, we still have a long way to go to forge a new trade era that puts workers first."

Les Schwab Tires pays workers $16 million for missed breaks

To settle a class action lawsuit, the Les Schwab tire center chain last month agreed to pay about $2,500 each to roughly 3,700 current and former Oregon workers. The lawsuit alleged that the company routinely shorted workers on their lunch breaks. Oregon law requires that workers be given an uninterrupted meal break of at least 30 minutes for ever six to eight hours worked.

The Oregon AFL-CIO joined the lawsuit in October 2017 with a 24-page friend-of-the-court brief, arguing that employers have a duty to ensure that workers take the minimal meal break required under the law.

"Les Schwab contends that if an employee works through the full lunch period, every day, Les Schwab can just reap the benefits of that work and has no obligation to pay the employee, unless the company 'prevented' the employee from taking a lunch break," the labor federation said in the brief. "This position completely eliminates any duty of the employer to support its employees' health and safety by ensuring they take the minimal meal break required under the law."

The settlement totals $16 million, and includes just under $4 million in attorney fees and court costs.

In September, Les Schwab's family owners sold the company to Meritage Group, a California investment firm.