

# 2020 in review

As chronicled in the Northwest Labor Press, here are some of the year's most important developments for organized labor and working people.

## THE YEAR OF COVID

More than anything, 2020 was the year of the coronavirus. A viral particle one-ten-thousandth of a millimeter in size emerged from Wuhan, China, battered the global economy and killed 1.76 million people, including 331,000 Americans, by year's end.

The virus led to school and factory closures, plummeting transit ridership, and a boom in Amazon and delivery services like never before. American workers were laid off by the million, especially restaurant and live entertainment workers like musicians and stagehands, and airline and hotel workers. Unemployment reached 14.7% in April, the highest in over 70 years, but by November had dropped to 6.7%.

COVID-19 also momentarily elevated nurses and grocery workers to a new status as "essential workers," earning them gratitude and in some cases extra pay, but also exposing them to hazardous conditions as employers struggled to provide personal protective equipment (PPE).

Nationally, the AFL-CIO



pushed, cajoled, and filed a federal lawsuit to get OSHA to require employers to take specific actions to protect workers, all without success. Eight months into the pandemic, Oregon OSHA issued such a rule, joining two other states.

In Oregon, unions called for essential workers who contracted COVID to automatically get workers compensation benefits, but lawmakers and the governor wouldn't budge, and left in-

jured workers to prove they got it at work.

Local unions also mobilized to collect and distribute food and other aid to workers impacted by layoffs.

Organizational life altered dramatically, as union meetings, conventions, and apprentice training were cancelled or moved online via platforms like Zoom. Some union elections were postponed. Labor Day celebrations were called off.



## BLACK LIVES MATTER

The May 25 police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis led to a major surge in the Black Lives Matter movement. Union members took part in demonstrations and in clean-up efforts. At a moment of renewed commitment to racial justice, local unions at the City of Portland and in the local building trades pledged to foster more inclusive and respectful workplace cultures. Nationally, some activists pushed the AFL-CIO to expel police unions, but the labor federation rejected that idea, agreeing with the need for police reform but affirming that police officers, like everyone who works for a living, have the right to collective bargaining.



## ELECTION YEAR

After clinching the Democratic nomination for president, Joe Biden won near-unanimous union support, and defeated Donald Trump in the Electoral College amid a big increase in vote-by-mail and a historic high in voter turnout.

In Oregon, unions helped elect an ally, Shemia Fagan (left) to secretary of state. Labor also backed a successful ballot measure to decriminalize drug possession and increase on-demand drug treatment.

In the Portland area, a successful union-endorsed measure will make tuition-free preschool available to all Multnomah County, with teachers paid a living wage. And winning bond campaigns will support jobs in parks, and in school and library construction. But a Metro measure to pay for transportation went down to defeat.

## GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

A number of notable figures in the local labor movement died in 2020. But their work, and their memories, live on.

**Robert Blanche**, president of the Portland local of SAG-AFTRA

**Steven Deutsch**, one of the founders of the University of Oregon's Labor Education and Research Center

**Sam Dominy**, union rep for International Woodworkers of America and the Machinists

**Brian Severns**, former Machinists District Lodge assistant directing business representative

**Jerry Lantto**, directing business rep for the Machinists Woodworkers regional council

**George Miller**, former directing business representative of Machinists District Council 24 and NW Oregon Labor Council president

**Christ George Vokos**, former secretary-treasurer Bakers Local 364

**Dick Schneider**, former representative of the Machinists' international

**Sam Rutledge**, head of Woodworkers Local Lodge W12 in Klamath Falls

## OREGON/SW WASHINGTON HIGHLIGHTS

### BIGGEST PRIVATE SECTOR UNION ORGANIZING WIN

At Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare, 203 nurses, counselors, cooks, treatment specialists and other workers joined Oregon AFSCME.

### BIGGEST PUBLIC SECTOR UNION ORGANIZING WIN

At Mid-Columbia Center for Living, a three-county intergovernmental agency that provides mental health and addiction recovery services in the Columbia Gorge, 112 workers joined Oregon AFSCME.

### BIGGEST COLLECTIVE BARGAINING WIN

After a two day strike, about 500 Clark College faculty won raises of up to \$11,064 a year in a three-year contract that also puts part-timers on a path to hourly pay parity with full-timers.

### BIGGEST WORKERS RIGHTS ADVANCE

Under a new Oregon law that took effect July 15, large retail employers including grocery stores will have to offer predictable schedules and pay for last-minute changes.

### TOP BUILDING TRADES MILESTONES

In Portland, building trades union members completed work on the Oregon Convention Center headquarters hotel, Multnomah County Courthouse, and a massive renovation of the Portland Building, all while ramping up to record employment at Intel. And under the terms of an agreement brokered by the City's development agency, Prosper Portland, a planned 12-block redevelopment of the former postal facility in Northwest Portland will be done using union labor.