

Questions for Senator Merkley

With Democrats now in charge of the U.S. Senate, Oregon's Jeff Merkley could help pass major pro-worker legislation. NW Labor Press reporter Don McIntosh spoke with him by phone Jan. 28.

4,000 Americans are dying every day of COVID. 10 million are out of work. Global warming is melting ice caps and contributing to superstorms and forest fires. We have the worst economic inequality in a century. There's also a crime wave, worse-than-ever homelessness, and a national yearning for racial justice. What's the government going to do about all of this? You've accurately noted the really big issues we have to address. Because of the outcome in Georgia, the Democrats have a Senate majority, but by the slimmest possible amount—50-50 plus the vice president. But it's an institution where policy cannot be passed without a supermajority. I call this the "McConnell veto." [Republican Senate leader Mitch] McConnell revels in the role of destroying good policy as part of his theory of power, that if you disembowel the team in charge you make a

case for replacing them. So that is the burden we have right now in the Senate—the need to move quickly and boldly on issue after issue in an institution afflicted by rules that prevent it from moving boldly and quickly.

You've advocated filibuster reform for a decade. Finally some of your colleagues have come along. Are we in the final stretch? There's been an enormous change over the last couple years. People saw how McConnell abused the "McConnell veto" in 2009-2010 and having seen that horror film once, they don't want to see it again. [The filibuster] just paralyzes this place. So my colleagues now understand that this is not a strategy of making sure everyone is heard. This is making sure that every bill is stopped. We still have some members that are hoping and believing that somehow there can be a cultural change, a change of heart that can solve this problem, but the vast bulk of Democratic senators are now fully on board that these abusive practices by McConnell have to end. I think you're going to see us put important bills on the floor, to invite Republicans to offer amendments to see if they then proceed to block those bills

after they've had a chance to participate. And that process I think will help solidify the sense that we have to move quickly for reform if there isn't cooperation from the Republican side on letting the Senate function.

There's so much at stake, for everybody. And for the union movement in particular there's a couple pieces of legislation where the House has done their part and it's waiting on the Senate. Can you say a few words about the Protect the Right to Organize (PRO) Act, that would restore workers' rights to get a union and a fair contract? Absolutely. When I was running for the Senate in 2008, I was advocating for card check [a bill to allow workers to use a simpler method of unionizing that's less vulnerable to employer anti-union campaigns]. We had majority support but we never voted on card check. We failed. We cannot fail again. The Protecting the Right to Organize Act has to be on the floor. It has to be voted on. Workers need to be able to see where we stand. We need to hold accountable those who vote against this, and you can't hold them accountable if they don't ever have to cast a vote.



Any other message for our readers right now? We're going to see a big battle over the Biden plan. It is really important that we rebuild our economy and health care system from the ground up. Republicans are going to try to block it. So the only path to get it done is probably reconciliation [under Senate rules, reconciling budget bills with their House-passed versions takes just a sim-

ple majority and can't be filibustered.] We'll have to have 50 Democrats absolutely united taking that forward. We have to win that fight so suffering American families can get help.

MORE Read the complete interview at nwlaborpress.org/merkley, in which he shares his experience of the Jan. 6 Capitol attack.



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