

UNION DEMOCRACY

Leadership transition at Machinists W24

Following the retirement of Noel Willet, Wayne Thompson now directs District Lodge W24.

By Don McIntosh

Machinists District Lodge W24 has a new top officer. Wayne Thompson, 57, was sworn in Jan. 8 as president and directing business representative, the same day predecessor Noel Willet retired.

District Lodge W24 represents 5,300 machinists and woodworkers in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Northern California. Thompson was the district lodge's assistant directing business representative. Now he'll serve the remainder of Willet's term of office, which runs through December 2022.

Thompson grew up in Puyallup, Wash. After working as a logger a few years, he joined the Army in 1984, and served as a non-commissioned officer in the 1st Armored Division during the 1991 Gulf War. While stationed in Germany he met an Army medic, Kristine Pierce. They married in 1992, left the Army, and

returned to Western Washington, where she embarked on a career as a teacher and he got a union job with good benefits at Simpson Lumber in Tacoma, Wash.

Several months into Thompson's job at the sawmill, the president of International Woodworkers of America (IWA) Local 3-9 recruited him to get involved in the union. Thompson became a union steward and trustee, grievance and bargaining committee chair, and eventually secretary-treasurer of the local, volunteering to staff the local office every other day after work at the mill.

In 1994, IWA affiliated with the International Association of Machinists (IAM), becoming the IAM's Woodworker Division. In 1999, Thompson was elected full-time business rep for Machinists Woodworkers District Lodge W1. He was responsible

for Weyerhaeuser contracts in the region, eventually handling all 38 contracts in Washington.

District Lodge W1 merged with District Lodge 24 in 2011 and became District Lodge W24.

In 2019, Thompson was appointed assistant directing business representative by Willet. Now, Thompson will succeed him as directing business representative, overseeing nine union representatives who negotiate and enforce 133 union contracts.

"It's a big responsibility," Thompson told the *Labor Press*. "My number one goal is to ensure that we continue to provide the level of service to members." Thompson

also wants the District Lodge to embrace technology, and to focus on organizing in the district.

IAM's Woodworkers Division has been losing members and employers for decades amid

wave after wave of mill closures.

In 2015, the Tacoma sawmill where Thompson got his start in the union closed permanently.

Ensuring the continued viability of the wood products industry is a union priority. W24 is part of the Blue-Green Alliance, a coalition of union and environmental groups. Thompson hopes when state lawmakers consider climate change legislation, the wood products industry can get credit for its role in sequestering carbon in processed lumber.

He's also helping launch a new Machinist apprenticeship program with the help of a \$10 million grant from the Washington Department of Labor & Industries.

Thompson serves as a trustee overseeing union health and retirement funds. And he'll represent Machinists on the boards of the state AFL-CIO in Oregon and Washington.

Like Thompson, Willet, 62, came from the woodworkers side of the union. He worked for Weyerhaeuser over 28 years, starting in 1978 around Aberdeen, Washington: setting chokers, rigging, tending hook, running yarders, and driving log trucks.

Not every union member gets active. Willet says his involvement began after he was unjustly fired by his employer and the union won his reinstatement.

"From that point forward, I was active in the union," Willet says. "I learned about unionism and got involved."

Willet became a shop steward, trustee, vice president, and president of his local, IWA Local W2. In 2007 he was hired as a union representative, sent out to organize across five states. Later he was responsible for negotiating and enforcing union contracts.

Looking back, Willet says respectful disagreements, vigorous conversation and listening are the key ingredients for a strong inclusive union.

"Nothing is ever accomplished by a single individual," Willet says. "It's collaborative efforts and teamwork which produce positive results for our membership."

In retirement, Willet says he'll spend more time outdoors hunting and fishing with his wife Shelley, who retired after a 38-year career in law enforcement, and hit the road on his union-made Harley-Davidson.



Wayne Thompson



Noel Willet



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