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IN THIS ISSUE

TAKING UNION TRADES AGENDA TO THE CAPITOL

Wayne Chow experienced wage theft first hand. | Page 2

CHARGES DROPPED AGAINST SCABBY THE RAT

Biden's new top NLRB attorney is halting the case | Page 4

Meeting notices p. 4 Nonunion city workers organize p. 8

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JOBS

Unions and developers ally to stop BDS cuts

City building code enforcers are getting some unexpected love from the construction industry.

By Don McIntosh

A remarkable coalition is converging around what might seem like a surprising cause: Saving the jobs of building inspectors and construction plan examiners at the City of Portland's Bureau of Development Services (BDS). About 98% of BDS revenue comes from building permit fees, and those are down sharply since the pandemic began, prompting the bureau to plan for layoffs. As you might expect, unions representing the workers are appealing to Portland City Council to avert layoffs. But they're being joined by building trades unions, construction contractor associations, developers, realtors, minority contractor groups, even the Portland Business Alliance.

Above all, the union and business groups want to avoid what happened after the 2008 recession hit. Faced with a similar drop in permit revenue, BDS radically downsized its



Thanks to permit fees paid by the construction industry, the Bureau of Development Services paid off the bond last year on its office building at 1900 SW Fourth Ave. Then the city raised its rent to \$45.50/sq ft./year.

workforce from 315 to just 147 staff by 2010. When construction demand returned, it took half a decade for BDS to replace those laid-off inspectors and plan evaluators. That created a years-long slowdown in processing permits, which delayed construction starts and resulted in thousands of construction workers being out of work longer than they needed to be.

The reason BDS had a hard time recruiting is pretty basic: Electrical inspectors are electricians; plumbing inspectors are

plumbers; architectural plan examiners are architects. In each case, workers with those skills tend to earn more in the private sector than they do working for the city.

The work BDS does is important and necessary. Construction contractors may complain about fees, wait times, and complexity, but no one wants to be the city where buildings collapse on their occupants or burn because of im-

Turn to Page 6

WORKERS RIGHTS

A fix for America's broken labor law

Congress may soon consider the most game-changing pro-union legislation in 80 years.

By Don McIntosh

On Feb. 4, House and Senate Democrats re-introduced a sweeping labor law reform bill that would restore workers' right to unionize and bargain for a better life. Known as the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act, it passed the U.S. House last year 224 to 194, but the bill never even got a hearing in the Senate while Republicans controlled that chamber. Now that Democrats have retaken the Senate, passing it into law is a possibility.

The PRO Act would reverse 83 years of anti-union legislation and court decisions and lead to a dramatic increase in unionization and significant gains for tens of millions of working people in the United States.

Upon reintroduction, the bill had 41 cosponsors in the Senate,

including Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and all four Oregon and Washington Senators: Jeff Merkley, Ron Wyden, Patty Murray, and Maria Cantwell. The reintroduced House version of the bill had 170 sponsors, including Earl Blumenauer, Suzanne Bonamici, and Peter DeFazio of Oregon.

The PRO Act is a comprehensive re-write of the law that governs how most private sector workers unionize. The 1935 National Labor Relations Act guaranteed most private sector workers the right to form unions and strike, and obligated employers to negotiate with them in good faith to try to secure collective bargaining agreements. But the law's penalties were never much of a deterrent to employers, and its protections of workers' union rights were dramatically weakened by later legislation and Supreme Court de-

Turn to Page 6



NURSES DEMAND COVID SAFETY

Nearly 100 union nurses from multiple Providence facilities were joined by Oregon AFL-CIO President Graham Trainor and Multnomah County Commissioner Sharon Meieran (left) at a Feb. 5 rally outside Providence Portland Medical Center to demand basic COVID-19 safety protections for the more than 4,000 nurses in the Providence system. Oregon Nurses Association has been pushing for COVID-19 safety measures since May 31, 2020. Demands include presumptive eligibility for workers' compensation if they contract COVID-19; guaranteed access to point-of-care COVID testing; the right to adequate personal protective equipment; and additional paid time off to care for themselves and their families if they get COVID. "It's not enough to simply say 'nurses are our heroes,'" said Meieran, an emergency room doctor. "We need to show you we have your backs. It's unacceptable that 11 months in, nurses would still be struggling to implement safety measures."

