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PEOPLE

Taking a building trades agenda to the Oregon Capitol

Electrician Wayne Chow knows first hand the difference a union makes.

By Don McIntosh

When Robert Camarillo was chosen to head the Oregon Building Trades Council in 2018, taking the construction union agenda to the state capitol was a one-person operation. Last year, reinforcements arrived: IBEW Local 48 president Wayne Chow.

Chow, 43, brings a unique perspective to the job, as someone who suffered wage theft in the years before he found his union.

Born and raised in Toronto, Chow worked as a motorcycle mechanic when he moved to Portland in 2000, but entered an electrical apprenticeship on the encouragement of his then father-in-law. Unfortunately for Chow, it was the non-union program. Unlike the free-to-participants IBEW/NECA training program, that meant he had to pay for tuition, books, tools, and lab fees, while earning just over minimum wage. Without a union hiring hall and dispatch, he had to solicit his own work. One nonunion contractor said flat-out that he wouldn't hire Chow because of his last name.

"I'm not white," Chow points out. "My father is from Hong Kong."

Working nonunion, he was fed antiunion propaganda even as his employer cheated him out of wages by setting expectations for off-the-clock work.

"They'd make you start 15 minutes early to take your tools out, put up the laydown



area, and get everything set up," Chow says. "Then they'd make you work past your quitting time. That's wage theft, but I didn't know any better. When you're in a situation like that, without a collective bargaining agreement, they have a lot of power over you. You're going to do what you need to do to keep your job."

Chow's lucky break came in 2006 when a union electrical contractor was employed alongside his company on a big job. His foreman told him not to talk with the union workers, but Local 48 members saw him working and approached him.

"This older guy pulled me over at lunch, and said 'You might want to think about go-

ing union. You look like you know what you're doing. We could use a guy like you.'"

"One of the guys actually said, 'I'll show you my paycheck and you show me yours.' I took a look, and I was like 'Holy shit!'"

Chow went to the union hall and signed on in 2007. He says he found not just better pay and unbeatable benefits, but a more collaborative workplace culture.

"I experienced how open people are in sharing their craft," Chow says. "In the non-union world, you don't want to share your skill set, because everyone's competing against each other. But in the IBEW you want to teach next generation everything, because you're going to rely on them one day to keep your pension funded."

In 2010, he joined Local 48's Volunteer Organizing Committee and got active, eventually becoming chair. The group organized the union's entry in the Rose Festival Starlight Parade, and put together a union education program for members. In 2013 he was hired by the local as an organizer. In 2016 he was elected Local 48 president, and reelected unopposed in 2019.

Now he spends 80% of his time as political coordinator for the Oregon State Building Trades, and 20% for the Columbia Pacific Building Trades.

"What I've experienced shows why do need better labor standards," Chow says. "I see myself speaking the truth, and fighting for our priorities. I come from the field, so when I have conversation with lawmakers it's from the heart."

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