



Who's on our side?

By Graham Trainor Oregon AFL-CIO President

Lawmakers must put workers and communities first

The 2021 Oregon Legislature is now in full swing and the labor movement and worker advocates are laser focused on an agenda that meets the gravity of this moment. Frontline and essential workers have been put through the wringer for a year as the pandemic has raged on, leaving an unfortunate and unnecessary death toll in its path. Our economy continues to lag, main street businesses remain shuttered, mass evictions loom over the summer without additional assistance for renters, and public health and economic crises are hitting workers of color and women the hardest. The time to act with bold, worker-centered policy is now.

Corporate Oregon is often the first to caution against major changes, big investments, and leadership that meets the needs of those bearing the brunt of any crisis. We hear it time and time again. "Too much too fast." "Oregon business will flee the state or automate jobs if this or that policy is enacted." "We need to slow down, take time to gather input from more stakeholders, and consider this policy next session." (Often the same mantra reappears in the next session as well).

These voices and this sentiment are

on full display every legislative session and at every turn. Stalling, killing, blocking, and casting doubt over nearly every single pro-worker policy is the recipe used by corporations and special interests to defend the status quo, stall progress, and stifle timely and necessary policy change. Unfortunately, this happens most often out of sight from the public and everyday Oregonians.

By contrast, the Oregon Labor Movement and worker advocates spend months preparing for each legislative session with a goal of amplifying the voices and the needs of working people; talking directly to working Oregonians about the challenges they face on the job and in today's economy; researching economic trends and their impacts on the working class; preparing and partnering with legislators that share our values, and building diverse coalitions of those aligned with our agenda.

As the first full legislative session since the pandemic took hold of our lives picks up steam, lawmakers have a unique opportunity to boldly tackle the challenges posed by the multiple crises facing our state and communities, while simultaneously rebuilding to a more just and fair Oregon.

The 2021 Oregon AFL-CIO legislative agenda is centered around a set of core values:

- Give essential workers the tools they need to keep themselves and their coworkers safe on the job;
- Ensure the barriers disproportionately holding back historically and currently marginalized workers in the economy are dismantled;
- Rebuild in a way that creates a more just and fair Oregon than we had pre-pandemic; and
- Invest in our state's workers and infrastructure to help jumpstart our economy and create family-supporting jobs.

Our roadmap to a better tomorrow is being written today. We must ensure that the Legislature will do what it takes to prioritize workplace and economic safety and security. Essential and frontline workers were called heroes a year ago, but as the days turned to months, action that truly reflects the sacrifice workers have made each day of this pandemic, of the wildfires, and of the recent ice storms has been insufficient. Oregon lawmakers have the opportunity this session to ensure gaps in unemployment insurance are fixed, protect workers from retaliation when they raise safety and health complaints, ensure adequate nurse staffing in hospitals, and make sure that all Oregonians have access to paid sick

time. This is the least the Legislature can do to ensure Oregon workers have what they need to weather the next year.

The time for bold, worker-centered leadership is now. Oregon workers won't let a pandemic or a remote legislative session stifle our advocacy for a better tomorrow. We need union members and workers throughout Oregon to get involved because we know that only through the voices of those who need change most do we see action. Your stories, your letters, phone calls and visits with lawmakers can and will have a direct impact on the decisions they make.

You can learn more about Oregon Labor's 2021 legislative priorities by visiting orafclcio.org/2021agenda. And visit orafclcio.org/lobbyday to register for Oregon Labor Lobby Day.

Working Oregonians are expecting to see change in the coming months. With a united labor movement, and the persistence and solidarity we embody every day, that change will become a reality as the Legislature continues its work. Oregon will be a better, more equitable, more inclusive state as a result.

The Oregon AFL-CIO is a 138,000-member-strong federation of labor unions.



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COVID relief bill could save distressed union pensions

Congress is working on a lengthy bill for further COVID relief. One small portion of it is modeled on the union-backed Butch Lewis Act, which passed the U.S. House in 2019 but not the U.S. Senate. Butch-Lewis would provide loans to union-sponsored multiemployer pension plans that are otherwise headed toward insolvency.

About one in 10 multi-employer pension plans are in that situation thanks to stock market losses and declining numbers of active employees in the plans, and the wellbeing of up to 1.3 million union members and spouses is at stake. Butch Lewis would shore up declining pensions and restore benefits that were cut by some pensions in an effort to forestall insolvency.

If Congress does nothing, the Central States Teamster Pension is expected to run out of money in 2025. That would lead the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC) itself to become in-

volvent. PBGC is a government insurance agency that guarantees pension benefits.

The Butch-Lewis proposal was included in the COVID relief bill that passed the House Ways and Means Committee on Feb. 11 by a vote of 25-18. That cleared it for a vote on the House floor. The final version of the next COVID-19 relief bill is expected to be voted on in March.

A stand-alone version — The Emergency Pension Plan Relief Act of 2021 (EPPRA) — was introduced Jan. 21 by Rep. Richard Neal (D-MA), chair of the House Ways & Means Committee.

According to a summary of the bill, a troubled pension plan would receive enough financial assistance to keep it solvent and funded for 30 years — with no cuts to the earned benefits of participants and beneficiaries. Plans that previously cut benefits would have to restore them to the retirees who earned them. In exchange, each plan would have to comply with certain conditions and report to PBGC.