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NATIONAL

American Rescue

Here are some highlights of the $1.9 trillion COVID relief bill.

The American Rescue Act—a $1.9 trillion stimulus package—passed the House 219-212 on Feb. 27, the Senate 50-49 on March 6, and the House again 220-211 on March 10. Not a single Republican voted for it in either chamber. President Joe Biden signed it into law March 11, exactly one year to the day after COVID was declared a global pandemic. U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) calls it "one of the most transformative pieces of legislation since the New Deal."

"This bill will put money in pockets, shots in arms, and kids in schools," Merkley said in a March 12 video chat with reporters. Here's some of what's in it:

- **Direct payments** $1,400 stimulus checks to American taxpayers making $75,000 or less ($112,500 for single parents, $150,000 for couples), and for their dependents. Payments taper off for incomes above that and disappear above $80,000/$120,000/$160,000.
- **Unemployment insurance benefits** Benefits that were set to expire March 14 now go to Sept. 6, and so does the $300 a week addition to regular benefit levels. The first $10,200 in unemployment insurance benefits are made exempt from federal income tax.
- **Relief for union pensions** $86 billion in financial assistance for struggling union-sponsored multiemployer pension plans, enough to cover all benefits due through 2051, with no cuts to benefits. For over a million union households, this is monumental. See Article Page 3
- **Unemployed health insurance:** Six months of COBRA coverage for laid off workers (April 1 through Sept. 30) is paid for entirely.
- **Public health:** $48.3 billion for testing, contact tracing and PPE; $5.2 billion for vaccines and supplies; $7.5 billion for vaccine distribution; $10 billion to expand domestic production of PPE, vaccines and medical supplies under the Defense Production Act.
- **Monthly checks for families with children** Existing child tax credits are expanded and made refundable for a year, and instead of getting the credit at tax time, families will get funds monthly: $300 a month per child 5 and younger, and $250 per child aged 6 to 17.
- **Childcare** $15 billion in grants to states to help low-income families afford child care and help essential workers, and $24 billion for state grants to child care providers. The Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit is expanded to $4,000 per child or $8,000 for two or more children, and made fully refundable.
- **Food stamp expansion** $12 billion to extend a 15% increase in monthly benefits of food stamps to Sept. 30.
- **Help with rent and mortgages** $21.6 billion for emergency rental assistance distributed through state, local and tribal governments, with priority for lower-income families that have been unemployed for three months or more. $10 billion to help homeowners struggling with mortgage payments, utility bills and other housing costs avoid foreclosure; $5 billion for emergency public housing vouchers; $5 billion to address homelessness.
- **Paycheck Protection Program** The forgivable loan program for businesses to maintain payroll will be extended and will now be available to tax-exempt groups including labor organizations, which had been excluded in previous relief bills.
- **Payroll support for airline and aerospace** $15 billion to pay wages and benefits of airline industry employees, on condition that employers have no layoffs or pay cuts through Sept. 30, with restrictions on stock buybacks, dividend payments and executive pay. $3 billion to maintain payroll for aviation manufacturers—covering 50% of pay and benefits for employees at risk of furlough, up to 25% of a company's U.S. workforce.
- **Mass transit** $30.5 billion for public mass transit agencies to prevent layoffs and service cuts. $1.7 billion for Amtrak to restore full long-distance service to pre-pandemic levels and recall 1,230 furloughed workers.
- **Help for state, local and tribal governments** $350 billion to maintain services and prevent public worker layoffs.
- **Aid to schools and colleges to reopen safely** $125 billion in state grants for primary and secondary schools and $39.6 billion for colleges and universities—to provide protective equipment, improve ventilation and help schools reopen.
- **Help for restaurants** $28.6 billion grant program for restaurants.
- **Workplace safety:** $200 million for pandemic-related worker protection programs at the Labor Department, including OSHA enforcement and worker training in high-risk sectors such as meat processing, health care, correctional facilities, and agriculture.

WORKERS' RIGHTS

Techs strike at St. Charles Hospital in Bend

By Don McIntosh

Well, that got their attention. After trying for over a year to get a first-ever union contract by asking and waiting, 143 medical technologists at St. Charles Medical Center in Bend tried striking instead, walking off the job March 4, eighteen months after they joined Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals (OFNHP).

Nine days later, they returned to work after St. Charles management agreed to a union proposal to resume negotiations and hammer out a deal by March 31. Hospital representatives who had met with union negotiators just once in three months now will meet four days a week until they have a deal.

Union support seems to have grown since workers voted 90-

Turn to Page 2

House re-passes the PRO Act

The U.S. House of Representatives passed organized labor's top legislative priority March 9—the Protect The Right To Organize (PRO) Act, HR 842. The vote was 225-206, with five Republicans joining all but one Democrat in support. Oregon U.S. Reps. Suzanne Bonamici, Peter DeFazio and Earl Blumenauer were co-sponsors.

The House passed a similar PRO Act bill in February 2020 by a margin of 224-194. At that time, Oregon U.S. Rep Kurt Schrader was one of seven Democrats to vote against it. But after facing considerable pressure from working people in his district (see Page 7) he changed his vote the second time around.

The 2020 version of the bill died in the Republican-led U.S. Senate without a hearing.

The PRO Act is designed to ensure workers can band together to negotiate better wages and safer working conditions by ending prohibitions on collective and class action litigation; prohibiting employers from permanently replacing striking employees; and amending how employees are defined to ensure that no one is misclassified as an independent contractor. In addition, it would strengthen remedies and enforcement for employees who are exercising their rights; create a mediation and arbitration process for new unions; protect against captive audience meetings; and streamline National Labor Relations Board procedures

HR 842 now goes to the Senate, where it still faces an uphill battle, though not as steep as in 2020. Democrats control the Senate with 50 votes, plus the vice president, but they may need 60 votes to overcome a projected Republican filibuster.

"We're not going to let a minority in the Senate stop the PRO Act," AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka vowed in a video press conference, noting that polling shows 65% of Americans today support unions.