



Who's on our side?

By Graham Trainor Oregon AFL-CIO President

A time for mourning *and* action

This year, on April 28, Oregon's unions will observe Workers Memorial Day amidst a grim backdrop the likes unseen in our lifetime. Workers continue to face unnecessary and avoidable risk on the job with too many, year after year, paying the ultimate, unthinkable price. And essential and frontline workers in our communities have simultaneously faced a deadly invisible airborne virus every time they have clocked in for over a year.

Fifty years ago, on April 28, 1971, the Occupational Safety and Health Act went into effect, promising every worker the right to a safe job. The law was won because of the tireless efforts of the labor movement, which organized for safer working conditions and demanded government action. Unions and our allies have fought hard to make that promise a reality—winning protections that have made jobs safer and saved lives. But our work is not done. Each year, thousands of American workers are killed and millions suffer injury or illness because of dangerous working conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the inextricable link between workplace safety and the health of our communities. The virus has killed more than 500,000 people in this country so far—dev-

astating working families, with a disproportionate impact on historically and currently marginalized workers and their families.

Unions and our allies stepped up to demand and win job protections from this highly contagious virus. We organized for safe jobs and the right to speak out against unsafe working conditions. We demanded access to the ventilation, respirators and other measures that better protect workers from contracting the virus at work. Given the lack of federal action, unions won emergency workplace protections in Oregon and only three other states.

Worker safety and workers' voice go hand in hand. According to a 2018 report that analyzed the effect unions have on workplace safety, unions have a protective effect on workplace fatalities. Specifically, a one-percentage-point increase in the unionized workforce was associated with a 2.8% decline in occupational fatalities. That is why America's labor movement is leading the campaign to pass the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act, which would give all workers the opportunity to join a union. Strong unions hold employers and the government accountable to keep workers safe. Strong unions raise the level of job safety protections for all.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the lack of resources and accountability for the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) to ensure workers are protected on the job, as well as the structural failures that have prevented workers from organizing for safer working conditions. Workplace safety agencies across the country and in Oregon have been hollowed out with a reduction in staff and a stagnant budget. Many workers never see OSHA in their workplace, even after filing a complaint. Penalties are too low to be a deterrent. Workers are not adequately protected to speak out against unsafe working conditions and to join a union without retaliation. As we look to the next 50 years of national worker protections, Congress and the Oregon Legislature must strengthen workplace safety agencies to renew their promise to working people, and issue life-saving protections against workplace violence, infectious diseases, heat illness, smoke exposure, and toxic chemicals—preventable hazards that kill tens of thousands of workers each year.

On April 28, the American labor movement will observe Workers Memorial Day to remember those who have suffered and died on the job, and to renew the fight for safe jobs for every worker. We will mobilize to pass the PRO Act so workers have a voice on the job. We will stand united to strengthen workers' rights and protections, and demand resources and actions needed for job safety enforcement. We will fight for the right of every worker to a safe job, until that promise is fulfilled.

Decades of struggle by working people and our unions have improved working conditions

and made jobs safer, but it has not been enough. This year we have an opportunity to strengthen our rights and protections, so everyone can come home safely at the end of a work shift, and without chronic illness or injury.

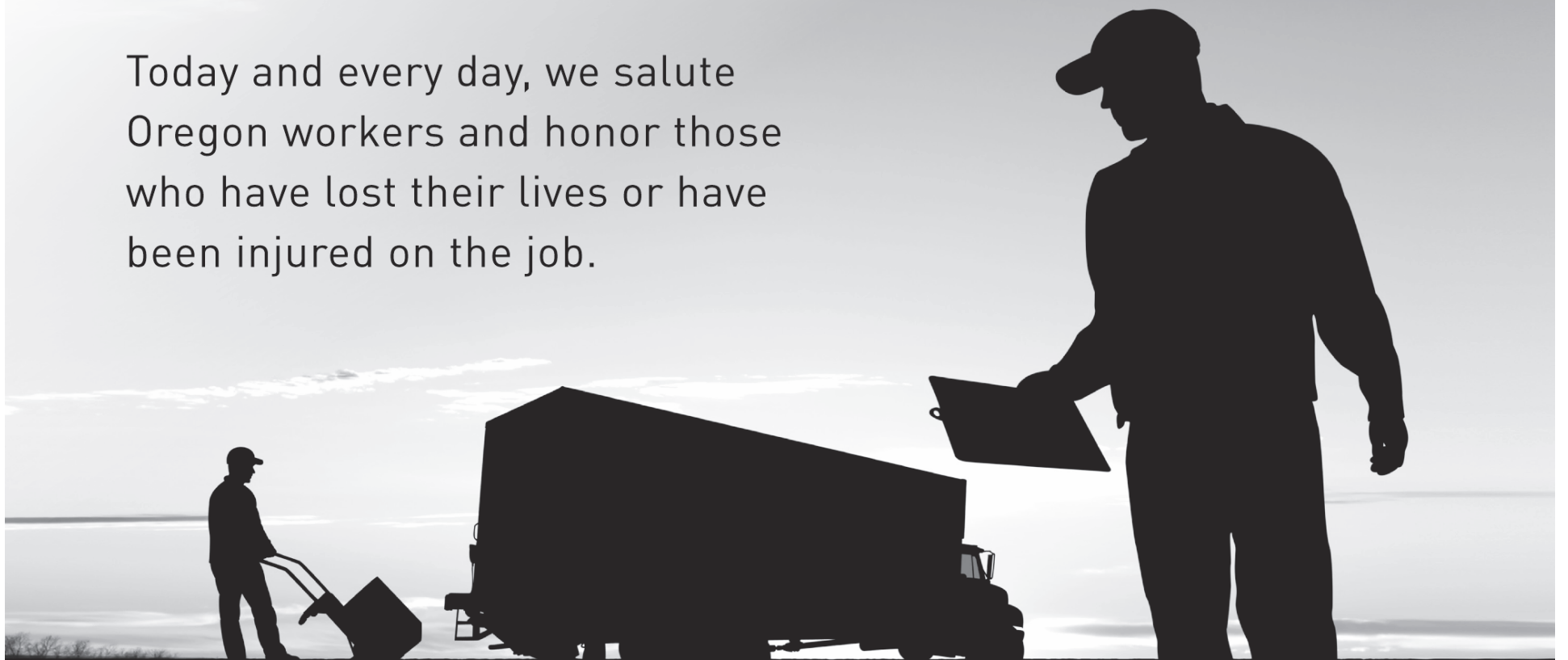
As we grieve those we have lost from COVID-19 and other workplace hazards, we must continue to push forward. We must:

- Ensure that all workers have the necessary protections from COVID-19 at work.
- Pass the PRO Act in Congress to ensure workers have a safety voice on the job and the right to freely form a union without employer interference or intimidation.
- Pass the Protecting America's Workers Act in Congress to provide OSHA protection to millions of workers without it, stronger penalties for companies that seriously violate job safety laws, and improved anti-retaliation protections.
- Increase efforts to protect the safety and health of Black, Latino and immigrant workers, who are disproportionately affected and especially targeted for speaking up against unsafe working conditions.
- Win new protections on workplace violence, smoke exposure, heat illness, exposure to asbestos and other toxic chemicals.

This Workers Memorial Day, we must honor those we have lost from workplace fatalities by recommitting in the years ahead to the necessary action, campaigns, and struggle toward our vision of safe workplaces for every worker.

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

Today and every day, we salute Oregon workers and honor those who have lost their lives or have been injured on the job.



Workers' Memorial Day | April 28, 2021

saiif Work.
Life.
Oregon.