



Who's on our side?

By Graham Trainor Oregon AFL-CIO President

Legislature must prioritize essential worker pay

When the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) passed earlier this year, it signaled a new direction for our nation's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. ARPA is the shot in the arm this country needed, and it could not have come soon enough. For over a year workers have shouldered the massive burden of the pandemic. And yet, as they have been called heroes by politicians, bosses and CEOs, the actions and support for essential and frontline workers has been anything but heroic.

As part of ARPA, Oregon will receive billions in federal dollars to help Oregonians through the rest of the pandemic. The funds are intended, in part, to support frontline and essential workers as a way to honor them for the 14 months of hell they have endured. This is an opportunity for our state to put words into action and invest in the heroic workers who have kept our communities both functioning and safe since Day One of the pandemic. As any Oregonian knows, this year has been especially difficult due to historic wildfires that slashed apart wide swaths of our state. We need to step up for everyone who has stood up for us.

Recently, the CDC upended work-

place practices by announcing that vaccinated individuals can be unmasked indoors. This overnight and abrupt change has the potential to have negative impacts on immunocompromised workers who cannot be vaccinated, adding to the growing concern regarding breakthrough cases (COVID-19 cases contracted by fully vaccinated individuals) and the potential transmission from vaccinated individuals to those who cannot be vaccinated yet, like children. Our state must recognize the undue burden this change continues to place on frontline and essential workers and ensure OR-OSHA protections are strengthened, workers have access to essential worker pay, and provide additional protections for immunocompromised workers. The Oregon Health Authority also has the ability to and should frequently inform the public about the impacts of the CDC's new guidelines as they pertain to vaccination rates and breakthrough cases.

Working people and families have kept Oregon running through more than a year of uncertainty. Among frontline and essential workers, workers of color are overrepresented: Nearly a third are Black workers and close to 40% are

Latinx workers. What is also very telling is that nearly half of essential workers do not even earn a living wage. They have put their lives on the line to support themselves and their families, often incurring additional costs to keep working in person when many of us were able to work from home. They have been forced into making sacrifices no one should have to make in order to earn a living.

Our frontline and essential workers deserve better. They deserve to be honored and supported—which is exactly what some of the funding from the ARPA is supposed to be used for. Right now, Oregon lawmakers are deciding how to use those funds, and there are two very different approaches being considered. One would put these dollars into the hands of the diverse frontline and essential workers, which means those dollars go right back into Oregon's economy, support working families, and show overdue respect to the people who have kept us moving since March 2020. The other approach would put disproportionate amounts of these federal dollars into reserves instead. The first approach is widely supported. According to a survey con-

ducted last year, a majority of Americans believe that frontline workers should receive hazard pay.

The sacrifices and toil by frontline and essential workers have not only kept our state running, they have also kept us safe. Oregon has consistently ranked among states with the fewest COVID-19 cases in the country. Our success is all thanks to the workers who not only clocked in each day but did so as safely as they could. They wore masks, fought hard for policies to make work safe, and then had to fight even harder for prioritization in our state's vaccination schedule.

When the pandemic is all but a memory, I hope our lawmakers can be proud that they decided to stand up for the people who carried us through it all. To spend this long fighting for safety and to be vaccinated just to be safe enough to go to work is truly heroic. Let's do our heroes justice by putting essential workers who have kept us safe, fed, clean and healthy first. Let's make sure that Oregon's legacy during this time is one to be proud of.

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

JOB TRAINING

Journeyman card counts toward college credit

When she joined the union Cement Masons apprenticeship program in 2013, Valerie Carroll remembers hearing something about how you could get college credit for your journeyman card. So after she became a journeyman in December 2018, she followed up on it, and used the credit to help complete an associate's degree in applied science from Mt. Hood Community College (MHCC). Now 42, she's working toward a bachelor's degree in construction management from Brigham Young University-Idaho. Online from her home in Aloha, she takes one or two BYU classes per term—while working full time as a cement mason, and raising three kids as a single mom.

It's not just cement masons who can get college credit for a journeyman card. MHCC has similar agreements in place with local union apprenticeship programs for Brick Masons, Carpenters, Electricians, Floor Coverers, Glass Workers, Insulators, Ironworkers, Roofers, Painters, Plasterers, Sheet Metal Workers, and starting this July, Laborers.

Dawn Loomis, director of MHCC's Workforce, Apprenticeship & Community Education program, thinks not many construction union members know about the program. Last year just 31 individuals got associate's degree through the MHCC program.

Given that a journeyman card itself is a golden ticket to a rewarding career, Loomis says it's not surprising that most wouldn't feel the need to get the degree too, but it's available for those who want it.

"We're trying to get the word out," Loomis said. "It's not college *or* apprenticeship; you can do both."

Cement Masons Apprenticeship Coordinator Jeremy Kendall said his union's training program includes 11 classes in all, each of which entitles you to credit at MHCC. That leaves a journeyman just a few classes shy of an associate's degree, and the Cement Masons Local 555 training center will even pay for members to take those classes—as long as the classes are construction related and the member earns a B grade or better.

Cement masonry isn't just brawn and skill. There's also math involved, for example in laying out steps or estimating concrete. The union-affiliated joint apprenticeship program includes two weeks a year of classroom instruction.

When Carroll became a journeyman, she found that she had only three more classes to get the associate's: math, writing, and science.

Cement Masons Local 555 Business Manager Geoff Kossak says most members don't want or need the college credit. After all, being a cement mason is a rewarding career with pay of over \$35 an hour and family-friendly benefits like health insurance, vacation and retirement. But for those who want it, college credit can also come in handy.

Carroll found that her journeyman card gave her a boost toward an associate's degree, and now that's counting toward the bachelor's degree in construction management, which she hopes to complete by fall 2023.

"I would like to work my way into being a superintendent," Carroll says.

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CEMENT MASON. MOM. COLLEGE STUDENT. Valerie Carroll was able to get college credit for what she learned in the Cement Masons Local 555 apprenticeship program. Now that's counting toward a degree. For information about how to use your journeyman card toward an associate's degree, visit mhcc.edu/aasapprenticeship