

WASHINGTON



Trumka will keynote Washington State AFL-CIO convention

The Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO, representing approximately 500,000 rank-and-file members in more than 600 labor organizations, will welcome national AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka as keynote speaker to its 2021 Convention, which will be held July 21-23 via Zoom video conferencing.

“This past year has been hard on working families, but we have risen to the pandemic’s multiple challenges and now we have the opportunity to build back better instead of merely returning to ‘normal,’” said WSLC President Larry Brown. “This convention will set the WSLC’s course for the coming year as we work together to ensure our collective voice is heard. That’s why we are urging all of our affiliated unions to send a full delegation to our convention to guide this important work.”

WSLC-affiliated unions are urged to register delegates now so their credentials can be verified and they can be sent all the

necessary materials and information in advance. Affiliates have already been sent a Convention Call indicating the number of delegates to which they are entitled. Each union’s master credential listing its delegates and alternates must be completed by **Monday, June 21**, along with the \$125 registration fee.

Delegates to the convention must be members of the union they are representing. Rank-and-file members who wish to represent their union as delegates should contact their local union for more information about how to serve in this role. All will receive trainings and step-by-step instructions from the WSLC on how to participate via Zoom.

The convention will convene at 5 p.m. on Wednesday, July 21, continue at 5 p.m. on Thursday, July 22, and resume at 9 a.m. on Friday, July 23. Convention business is expected to conclude by the end of the day Friday.

‘Ellensburg 6’ get raises

In March, we reported on a hullabaloo in the central Washington town of Ellensburg, population 21,000. The city-owned electric utility there employs six members of IBEW Local 77. At \$47.65 an hour, they’re underpaid compared to counterparts at neighboring utilities, and when the City of Ellensburg proposed just a single 1% pay increase for their next three year contract, they started holding public protests and got support from hundreds of locals as well as IBEW members throughout the region.

The effort seemed to have at

least some effect: In the end the City agreed to 3% per year in a three-year contract that runs through Dec. 31, 2023.

That’s likely to beat inflation, but it won’t catch members up to area standards. But as public employees under Washington law, the workers have limited options: They don’t have a legally recognized right to strike, and if labor and management can’t agree, management can just wait a year and impose its terms.

Members voted to ratify the deal April 12.

UNION ORGANIZING

Hillsboro clinic the latest to unionize with AFSCME

By Don McIntosh

In mail ballots counted June 1, workers at Hawthorn Walk-In Center in Hillsboro voted 33-9 to join Oregon AFSCME. Hawthorn is an outpatient mental health and addiction clinic and the base of operations of the Washington County Crisis Team and a mental health response team that responds to 911 calls alongside sheriff’s deputies. It’s operated by the nonprofit Lifeworks NW.

The organizing win adds 61 members to Oregon AFSCME, and it’s part of a wave of union organizing in behavioral health, a sector that combines mental health and addiction treatment.

Workers at Hawthorn see patients who are in acute crisis, including those referred by police and hospitals. The new bargaining unit includes therapists, psychiatrists, chemical dependency counselors, case workers and support staff.

More than anything else, workers say they’re motivated to unionize by a belief in the importance of their work and a desire to keep doing it. With degreed case managers making around \$21 an hour and therapists making around \$30 an hour, turnover has been high.

“Experienced employees

“When your boss tells you you don’t need a union, you definitely need a fucking union.”

— Skye Sodja,
Lifeworks union supporter

who have been doing this for years are leaving in droves,” said Skye Sodja, whose service coordinator job at Lifeworks is akin to a short term case manager. “There’s a nationwide shortage of people in this field.”

Sodja said the union campaign began late last year, but when it went public in April, managers seemed to be taken by surprise. They were not pleased.

“We respect your right to choose,” Lifeworks NW CEO Mary Monnat wrote to employees, “but we ask that you vote *no* in this election and give us a chance to continue to work together with you directly, without a third party between us.”

Soon, managers were holding workplace meetings at which they offered their opinions about why a union was not a good idea for workers.

“When your boss tells you you don’t need a union, you definitely need a fucking union,”

Sodja told the *Labor Press*.

The first antiunion meeting was an open conversation, workers say, but at later meetings, questions and backtalk were discouraged.

“Management’s response probably solidified our ‘yes’ votes” said Hawthorn therapist Corey Pursel. “You could see right through it. It was very manipulative.”

Lifeworks service coordinator Meleah Nordquest said some supervisors seemed to take it very personally. But Nordquest says it wasn’t personal—workers saw the union as a way to have a stronger say over decisions that affect them.

“I think it’s exciting that we can go down this route and just be able to say that our voice matters,” Nordquest said.

The next step will be to come up with proposals and begin negotiating a first union contract. At a minimum, workers are likely to want a transparent regular wage and salary schedule, cost-of-living increases to keep up with inflation, and health insurance that would enable them to cover family members.

“We weren’t sure if this would work,” Pursel said. “But we’re happy that we did it.”



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