



## Who's on our side?

By Graham Trainor Oregon AFL-CIO President

# Is it a labor shortage crisis, or a low wage, no benefits crisis?

It's hard to miss the countless dramatic news stories claiming that current labor shortages are the result of overly generous unemployment insurance benefits. In fact, we've seen a rush by Republican governors in nearly half of states across the country to eliminate increased unemployment insurance benefits under the guise that businesses need workers and that extra \$300 in supplemental benefits incentivizes them to stay home.

There is no question that some industries have faced challenges filling open positions as the economy has begun to reopen. But as we race towards state and federal goals of a 70% vaccination rate and the subsequent economic reopening push, we must look carefully at what the real barriers are and are not for workers reentering the labor market.

Let's start with childcare. Working women, especially women of color, have been forced to make impossible choices throughout the entire pandemic. Not only did a pervasive gender pay gap exist prior to COVID-19 taking hold of our lives (with most women of color making between 54 and 62 cents to every dollar their white male counterparts make), but now over a decade of progress towards gender

equality in the workplace has mostly stalled out since March 2020. Layer these inequities with a broken childcare system, where affordable, accessible, quality care is nearly impossible to find. According to a survey by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, a quarter of unemployed Americans say they can't go back to work because of childcare or other family care needs. There is no denying that on-going school closures, childcare deserts and the demands on parents and caregivers—most of whom are women and mothers—are preventing countless workers from returning to work.

Another factor often glossed over when Corporate America claims the "overly generous" UI benefits are the reason for current labor shortages is one of personal and public health concerns. While trends and outbreak data continue to look more promising, we are still in the midst of a global pandemic that has taken the lives of nearly 600,000 Americans and nearly 3,000 Oregonians, 117 of them the direct result of a workplace outbreak. For retail workers, restaurant and hospitality workers, and all those who interface with the general public, these jobs are now substantially more dangerous than they were two years ago. It seems

rather convenient to omit these grim statistics when prognosticating about the barriers to fully reopening, but the reality for immunocompromised Oregonians, those who live with someone who is immunocompromised, and those who are unable to be vaccinated is often one of constant fear, risk, and isolation. To suggest that these workers should simply get over their fears and return to work for the good of our economy is shameful and heartless given the immense risk of exposure they still face every day.

Now, let's talk about wages. In a capitalist economy, there are a few ways that labor shortages are created. As a *New York Times* article from May entitled "The Myth of Labor Shortages" suggests, one way that labor shortages are created is when workers demand such high wages that businesses cannot stay afloat. It's fair to say that this is not what is happening in today's economy. Instead, capitalism solves labor shortages when an employer or an industry raises wages for labor and thus incentivizes more workers to join or rejoin the workforce. Have we become so accustomed to low wages that it's harder to see these outlandish talking points from corporations and the elite for what they are?

Do we really believe that working Oregonians do not want to get back to work, get back to some sense of normalcy, and regain some economic footing after the past 15 months of turmoil?

Working Americans have gained some long-overdue leverage in the economy as the race to reopen progresses. Employers and elected officials have an opportunity, and an obligation, to ensure that frontline and essential workers, and all working people, are protected, respected and paid as we rebuild from this dark period in our history. The Oregon Labor Movement will continue to stand up, speak out, and fight for the dignity and respect of all working people, and we will continue to call out false slogans and squash myths about the experiences of working Oregonians.

And we should regularly be asking ourselves, our employers, and our elected leaders, "If an extra \$300 really is enough to keep a worker from reentering the workforce, what does that say about that job, that industry, and our economy?"

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

## Scabby the Rat and Fat Cat set up at Portland Public Schools HQ



Construction projects at several Portland Public Schools are going to non-union firms, and the school district is making it hard for building trades unions to check and see if those firms are obeying labor laws. The contractors submit records document-

ing that they're paying prevailing wage, but the district is delaying, redacting, and charging excessive fees to release those records. This lack of transparency prompted a visit to the district office in Northeast Portland on June 10 from Operating Engi-



neers Local 701's "Rat Tracker" and Laborers Local 737's "Fat Cat." Representatives from more than a half dozen other building trades locals took part in the protest. They'll be back every Thursday through July 1. (Photos by Mike Gutwig)