

LERC's Bob Bussel retires

From Page 6

Powers Hapgood, civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, and labor journalist Harvey Swados.

Ph.D. in hand, he went to work as a labor educator at Penn State. There he trained union stewards, taught classes on internal organizing, and led strategic planning projects for unions, while working closely with a central labor council in Reading, Pennsylvania.

In 2001, he moved to Eugene to serve as director of LERC, and spent the next two decades training Oregon union leaders. He also collaborated on research projects designed with real-world impact in mind. Bussel says he looks back with particular pride on an early 2000s study of privatization. Big corporations were pitching budget-pinched school districts on the idea of saving money by contracting out cafeteria, custodial, and school bus operations. But LERC showed that the savings came from slashing wages and benefits, and that school employees like custodians weren't just janitor/cleaners but reliable building managers who looked out for kids. Oregon School Employees Association took those findings and gave presen-

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— Bob Bussel,
retiring LERC director

tations to school boards around the state, and unions helped pass legislation barring privatization if savings would come solely from slashing compensation.

Over the years Bussel's passions also led him to research and publish two books. *From Harvard to the Ranks of Labor*, published in 1999, was based on his Ph.D. thesis. *Fighting for Total Person Unionism*, published in 2015, tells the story of a Teamster official and a civil rights leader who teamed up to fight for public housing, public transportation, and other public goods in St. Louis.

Over the 27 years he worked as a labor educator, Bussel says he got his greatest fulfillment from helping local union members gain a sense of confidence and hope that through organization and solidarity, they can change their lives.

But the perennial budget fight was a constant stress. Within the university, LERC is classified as an extension program, serving the public rather than offering for-credit courses. That repeatedly put LERC at risk when university administrators were looking for something to cut. In 2019, University of Oregon went from contributing two-thirds of LERC's budget to one-third. But the Oregon Legislature stepped in and now directly appropriates much of the remainder.

Bussel leaves LERC in the hands of its two remaining faculty: Gordon Lafer and Mark Brenner. They will serve as co-chairs while the center hires two more faculty in the next year.

In retirement, Bussel says he intends to be an active senior citizen, emphasis on "citizen."

"In our culture, the dominant gene is individualism, self interest, personal freedom," Bussel said in his retirement address. "But there's a recessive gene in our culture, and that's our faith in collective action, solidarity and mutual aid. It's the Knights of Labor concept, that an injury to one is the concern of all.... We may not win every fight in the labor movement, but we are always, always, always fighting for the right things."

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