

# Lawmakers pick up the mantle on timber workers

It is unconscionable that there are thousands of workers in Oregon who would suffer injury, forego fair pay and endure untenable living conditions out of fear of losing their jobs.

It's happening on our farms, in our hotels and restaurants, and in our beloved forests, where reforestation workers – most of them immigrants – are laboring with little or no tangible representation for their rights.

## EDITORIAL

In February, Street Roots investigated these working conditions, and through a series of stories, turned the heads of state lawmakers who are now taking the issue to heart.

This week, the Oregon Senate Workforce Committee, chaired by Sen. Michael Dembrow (D-Portland), took up the issue of forest workers rights and abuses in a special informational hearing. Lawmakers listened to accounts of crowded living conditions, undrinkable water, debilitating injuries, a demoralizing environment and in some cases death.

The lawmakers should be applauded for pushing this issue forward, as should the organizations that supported the workers and the workers themselves who had the courage to testify.

We trust lawmakers and the bureaucratic machinery in Salem will honor the testimony of these laborers with real action. And to make it easy, much of the improvements don't have to involve creating something new. It is about following through with the laws that already exist, and putting the resources behind the agencies charged to

enforce them.

This means increasing the budgets for enforcement, and compelling the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management – which are already inspecting many work sites for compliance with project contracts – to work with OSHA to conduct joint inspections so safety can be examined at the same time.

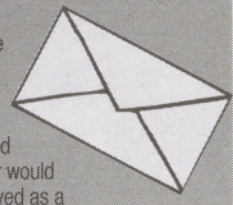
Improving workforce conditions also means removing the barriers to reporting problems, most notably the fear of retaliation. That fear not only means serious issues go unreported, it also skews the reports that do exist: The worst offenders, those who intimidate workers, have the fewest complaints, and continue to receive government contracts.

Other suggestions have practical applications on the ground. Joel Iboa with the nonprofit Beyond Toxics calls for supplying crews with water purification kits and sanitation, and given the hazardous nature of herbicides and pesticides applied by forest and field workers, requiring that all applicators be licensed.

"We owe fair treatment to these workers," Sen. Dembrow said.

Yes, particularly considering that many of the people employing them do so with our tax dollars.

So as the 2017 Legislative session starts ramping up, we will look for real movement forward in fulfilling the charge of our state agencies to ensure safe working conditions for all workers. Oregonians are tired of oversight bureaus functioning in name only. We can demand, and deserve, fair treatment for all.



### Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.

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# It's time for real investments in housing

I have witnessed people suffering on the streets every day – all day, year after year, for the past 15 years. They are traumatized. I am traumatized.

People tell me on the streets that they are desperate to find housing. It's one tragic story after another. They also

tell me how tent cities or encampments are keeping them safe, especially for women. Folks describe to me just how important it is to have a small moment of calm in the middle of a raging storm or the hell that is homelessness. They tell me these encampments save their lives.

I also work with a lot of people in power – the politicians, the

media, the bureaucrats, the strategists, the do-gooders and the affluent – who all care very deeply about the issue of homelessness. Working together, we all do our best try to capture opportunities for the collective good.

Still, on the issues of encampments, many people try to rationalize or debate why encampments or tent cities will not work. We could do so much better. The neighborhoods will hate it. It's a bad policy decision. We just need more shelter beds and housing for people on the streets. All points that I do not disagree with.

Unfortunately, the reality is that encampments do not exist in response to a rational approach to urban planning or a policy strategy or a philosophical approach to work with the homeless. Encampments exist simply because thousands of American citizens live in absolute poverty, on our streets, in one of the wealthiest communities on the planet. They are living and breathing human beings without a safe place to call home. There are no time-outs for people on the streets. There is no walking away from the situation that is homelessness.

I use the encampments as an example, because it appears that no matter how we respond to the housing crisis, our community finds itself on different ends of a perspective, debating why things can't be achieved instead of how things can be achieved.

Imagine you were in charge of a city and you have thousands of people experiencing homelessness sleeping on sidewalks, in public parks and under bridges. Rents are

skyrocketing in your city. Hundreds of baby boomers on fixed incomes are retiring by the month and you're short 35,000 affordable housing units to support the very people that made your city great. What do you do? That's the question everyone is asking.

One thing is clear. We need leadership and support from all sectors of our community. The old way of doing business isn't working. Some would argue it never has. That's neither here nor there today. What we need are real housing reforms and massive investments in the affordable housing stock in our community.

First things first: Editorial boards and the business community around the city should support newly introduced legislation by the city for a construction excise tax. The tax, referred to as CET, is a 1 percent construction tax for both residential and commercial developments. It's a small price to pay for developers given the opportunities it will create. The tax would generate millions of dollars annually for affordable housing.

So why are we making it more expensive to build housing? News flash. It's already expensive to build housing and the final costs for new development are already well beyond anything affordable that poor and working people. Understanding that we are in dire need of more affordable housing – we have to capture ongoing revenue on the construction boom we find ourselves. Beyond the construction excise tax, Portland needs deliver a housing bond on the November ballot measure. More so, Gov. Kate Brown and the Oregon Legislature have to deliver important legislation on no-cause evictions and ensure a massive investment in affordable housing around the state.

After all, it's not just Portland experiencing this problem. There isn't housing available for minimum wage workers and elders up and down the coast, in the central valley and out on the range. It's high times for some, and hard times for others in Oregon. To quote the great Woody Guthrie, California and in this case, Oregon is the Garden of Eden – a place to live in and to see, but believe it or not, you won't find it so hot if you don't have the do re mi.

Doing nothing isn't an option. If you think it's bad now, wait five or 10 years. It's going to get a whole lot worse before it gets better. It's essential we come together as a community and work together to tackle the problem.



## DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

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