

UNION BOSS

Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain discusses union busting in Portland, how building critical infrastructure will create jobs and other issues facing the workforce

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Few have fought as relentlessly for the rights of Oregon's workers as Tom Chamberlain.

He's been deeply involved in labor organizing since the 1980s and today is immersed in some of the most urgent issues facing low-wage workers— from efforts to turn his organization's office space into affordable housing to lobbying the Legislature for changes that would benefit everyone in Oregon's workforce.

After graduating from North Portland's Roosevelt High School in 1972, and following a brief stint in the U.S. Air Force, Chamberlain became a firefighter with Portland Fire and Rescue, where he worked nearly 30 years.

He also joined the Portland Firefighters Association Local 43 and moved up the ranks of the union until 1998, when he became its president.

After firefighting, he became policy adviser to former Gov. Ted Kulongoski, a position he left in 2005 when he was unanimously elected president of Oregon AFL-CIO, a position he holds today.

With more than 300,000 members among its affiliated unions, Oregon AFL-CIO represents a wide range of professions, such as steelworkers, plumbers, teachers and letter carriers.

But whether you belong to a union or not, Oregon AFL-CIO's legislative agendas are likely to affect you. It was a strong advocate for raising the state's minimum wage and for giving all Oregonians paid sick days, and next session it will be advocating for fair scheduling laws.

While union membership across the U.S. has declined considerably since its peak in the 1950s, membership in Oregon remains higher than the national average, with roughly 16 percent of workers represented in 2015, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

And Oregon's unions are growing, Chamberlain said.

While membership was lost during the recession, he said unions have not only made up for those losses, but the United Food and

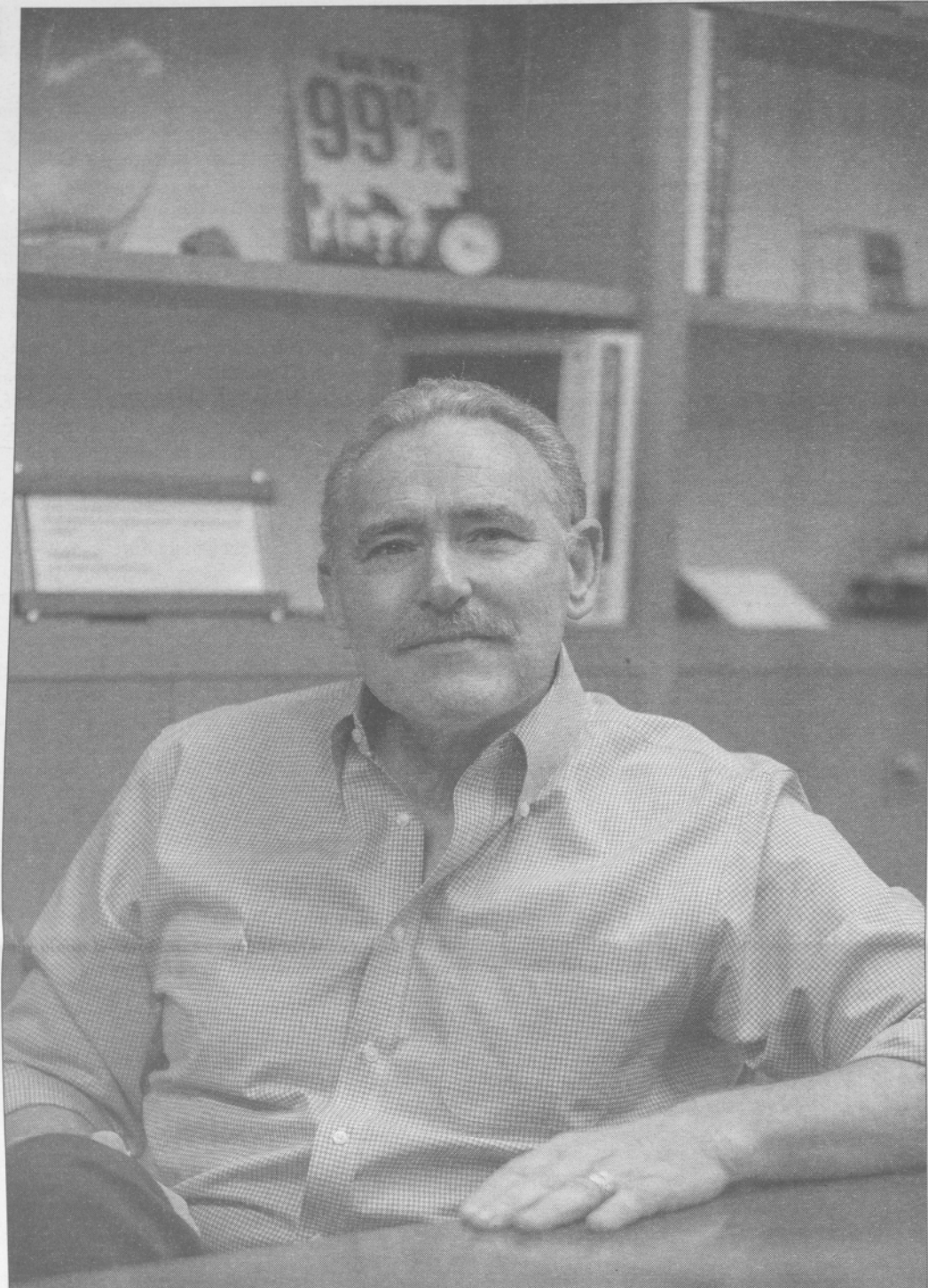


PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

Tom Chamberlain has been the president of Oregon AFL-CIO since 2005.

Commercial Workers International, Machinists Union and American Federation of Teachers are bringing in thousands of new members, organizing employees at Portland State University, Portland International Airport and in the private sector.

We recently sat down with Chamberlain at the Oregon AFL-CIO's Portland headquarters, about a half block off Southeast Powell Boulevard. We began by discussing the shift among some of the nation's most prominent blue-collar unions toward working with, rather than against, environmentalists.

Tom Chamberlain: The manufacturing unions have been attacked on two fronts: One is trade agreements – that devastated our manufacturing base – and environmental issues have been a secondary hit.

Now groups like the Steelworkers, who have probably been as impacted as any union that we have in the federation, have actually been on the forefront of some type of transition.

When you talk to manufacturing unions, it's not that we don't believe in global warming; it's that we know this transition from carbon-based

fuels to a greener type of energy, it's going to come with costs, and those costs will fall disproportionately on our membership.

So the Steelworkers have formed the BlueGreen Alliance, which brings labor and environmentalists together in trying to create some type of transition for their folks, and the transition is difficult because we know, for example, in the forest industry, when we put some restriction on logging practices, there was a loss of family-wage jobs.

We believed we could train our way out of it, and it never happened because oftentimes you can't train your way out of it when the folks that are being hit are in their 50s.

You have part of the labor movement that tends to be more environmentalist focused, and you have another group that's being impacted, trying to figure a way out.

Whether it's transition or just straight-up environmental issues, I think there's a lot of experimentation occurring on the national level, and in various states.

Then I see unions like IBEW, which is the

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