

Unions stand up to racism, hate

Labor leadership in Portland comes together in defense of targeted communities and immigrant workers

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Many activist groups may find their members fall into one school of thought or another, but few organizations represent such varying ideologies among their membership as unions.

Now, as the two outer edges of the political spectrum square off in Oregon, leaders of several local labor organizations are taking a stand against the vitriol that's been echoing from fringe factions of the far right.

Since November, Portland-based local unions representing painters, carpenters and stagehands have all passed strongly worded resolutions stating their plans to mobilize against racist and fascist hate groups, with several of their counterparts around the Pacific Northwest following suit.

The Oregon AFL-CIO also passed a resolution to stand against hate incidents, and it set up a hotline for workers to call if they experience hate or discrimination in the workplace.

Local labor groups have become a regular presence at area immigrant rights rallies and are gearing up to march alongside immigrant workers on May 1. In Salem, immigrant rights organization Causa and Oregon School Employees Association are co-presenting Salem's main May Day event, and others are planning events in Portland.

A recent resurgence of hate incidents in Oregon, along with the history of unions' organizing against white supremacists, is in part why it's the responsibility of the labor movement to take a stand against hate today, union representatives told Street Roots.

The Industrial Workers of the World in Seattle has also released a statement saying it will organize "against the KKK and other white supremacist organizations, to stand with other unions and other community allies, and to quickly mobilize when these forces present a threat."

Union opposition's racist roots

Most of these unions pointed to the connection between white supremacy and the origin of anti-union "right to work" laws in their resolutions, saying racist organizations pose a direct threat to union members and the labor movement as a whole, and always have.

"There certainly were some people who were white supremacist, and very much connected to that ideology, that were supportive of 'right to work,'" said Bob Bussel, labor history professor and director of University of Oregon's Labor Education and Research Center. Right-to-work laws



Members of Painters Local 10 protest outside the Oregon GOP's Freedom Rally at the Oregon Convention Center on Feb. 25. The protest was sponsored by the Portland Immigrant Rights Coalition. Local labor groups have become a regular presence at area immigrant rights rallies.

PHOTO BY DANIEL V. MEDIA

REPORT IT: HATE HOTLINE

Oregon AFL-CIO has set up a hotline for workers who have experienced or witnessed a hate incident at work. Call 503-412-8484 to report an incident, or visit orafcio.org/hotline to fill out an online form. You do not have to be a member of a union to use this hotline.

You can also confidentially report discrimination and hate-motivated incidents in the workplace to Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries Civil Rights Division. Call 971-673-0764, or 971-673-2818 for Spanish, or email cdemail@boli.state.or.us.

prohibit unions from automatically collecting dues from member workers.

"The basic idea of right-to-work laws were to make unions weak," he said. "In the Southern United States, unions were viewed as a direct threat to systems and structures of white supremacy because they threatened to organize workers – in some cases interracial – and they threatened to drive a wedge through the divide-and-conquer tactics that employers and their allies used. It's no accident a number of the states that enacted right-to-work laws following World War II were in the Southern United States, although not just there."

In a recent article for the Labor and Working Class History Association, Michael Pierce, a University of Arkansas associate professor, examined the connection among the origins of right-to-work laws, anti-Semitism and Jim Crow.

As states continue to contemplate right-

to-work laws, he argued, it's worth remembering how they originated – and it was in states where black people could not vote and political power was concentrated in the hands of the elite.

"Right-to-work laws sought to make it stay that way, to deprive the least powerful of a voice, and to make sure that workers remained divided along racial lines," Pierce wrote in the article. "The current push for Right-to-Work in Kentucky and Missouri (along with the fueling of nativism) does something similar – it is an attempt to persuade white working people that unions and racialized others are more responsible for their plight than the choices made by capital."

Today, more than half of U.S. states have right-to-work laws. Proponents say these laws are about workers' right to choose whether they want to pay dues. Union representatives say they are meant to hurt unions by attacking their

"If the U.S. labor movement is to rebuild its strength during this period of crisis of racist organizing and attacks, it must take up the struggle against white supremacy/white nationalism, not as an abstract debate, but as part of its social, political, and organizing agenda."

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funding source, and according to the AFL-CIO, workers in states with these laws have lower wages and are less likely to have employer-provided insurance.

Despite repeated attempts, no state on the West Coast has passed right-to-work legislation.

Corporate power and party politics

These days, it's corporate forces, not white supremacists, that are pushing the right-to-work agenda, said Marcus Widener, labor history expert and professor emeritus at the University of Oregon.

"There's a huge effort to spread right-to-work laws around the country by organizations like ALEC, who are very much aligned with the conservative Republicans," he said.

ALEC, the American Legislative Exchange Council, is a conservative organization that writes corporate-funded legislation for lawmakers to introduce in Congress and state legislatures.

There are questions, however, around what ratio of "lunatic fringe right" and traditional conservatives compose the Trump administration, Widener said.

"There would appear to be some rubbing of the shoulders of these organizations right

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