

NEWS

BY BEN RICKER

BURNT BERNERS FIRED-UP OVER CORPORATE TAX MEASURE

Some Bernie Sanders supporters wept as they watched Hillary Clinton snag her party's nomination at the Democratic National Convention this summer. Months of hard grassroots toil erased. Millions of dreams squashed.

Many diehard Berners balk at the notion of another Clinton presidency. And of course Trump is a non-starter. The quadrennial scrum for the Oval Office has devolved into a dog and pony show of oligarchic proportions.

With nothing doing on the national level, Oregon's Berners appear to have found a new rallying point: Measure 97, an embattled ballot initiative that aims to hike taxes for the richest companies in the Beaver State.

"This is Bernie 101," says Democratic political organizer Matt Keating, who introduced Sanders at his Island Park rally in Springfield.

Sanders' scrappy, no-nonsense campaign emphasized social and economic equity through tax reform. The stoop-shouldered neo-Robin Hood Vermonter repeatedly questioned the logical and moral underpinnings of a tax system that burdens blue-collar workers more heavily than it does the super rich, and regularly called on top earners and large corporations to "pay their fair share."

If voters in November approve Measure 97, aka the Oregon Business Tax Increase Initiative, it will set a \$30,000 minimum tax on certain businesses that rake in more than \$25 million in sales yearly. An additional 2.5 percent tax will be levied against gross sales above the \$25 million mark.

"This is a game changer," Keating adds, saying: "This will not only help Oregon balance its budget, but it's about fairness and social justice."

Money raised by the new business tax will go to Oregon's flagging schools, its drowning health care system and its dwindling services for senior citizens.

The threat of Trump setting up shop in the White House is too much for Keating, so he plans to vote for Clinton, come November. But he still carries a torch for Sanders and the political movement ignited by the unrepentant progressive Vermont senator.

Keating calls Measure 97 a "no-brainer."

"Do you think it's right that Oregon has some of the worst graduation rates?" Keating asks. "Do you think it's right that Oregon's schools are some of the worst in terms of class sizes? Do you think it's right that Oregon also has the lowest corporate tax rates in the country?"

It's difficult for Keating to guess how much credit Sanders deserves for the spirited push behind Measure 97, but he says at the Yes on Measure 97 kick-off celebration in Eugene he saw a lot of familiar faces from his Feel-the-Bern days.

Legislative director for the Oregon Parent Teacher Association Otto Schell says he's seeing a lot of politically activated young people rallying behind Measure 97, many of whom had a foot in Sanders advocacy, he suspects.

The OPTA is the oldest and largest advocacy group for children and youth in the state, and it's "all in on Measure 97," Schell says.

"Our message certainly resonates with Sanders' supporters," he adds, remembering Sanders' Portland rally as one of the biggest signature-gathering victories for Initiative Petition 28, the petition that paved the way for the business tax measure.

Like Keating, Schell says it's hard to identify all of the Berners who are joining the fight, but suspects there's significant overlap.

"One of Bernie Sanders' many victories was the amount of excitement his campaign generated," Keating says. "He brought millions of new voices into the fold."

But Sanders taught us also that you can't agitate for socialist reform in America without making powerful enemies.

Measure 97's opponents — a long list of corporate behemoths that includes Walmart and Comcast, as well as business associations like Eugene and Springfield Chambers of Commerce — bring a lot of muscle to the fight.

According to the Oregon Secretary of State's office, the campaign to Defeat the Tax on Oregon Sales has raised close to \$6 million, while Yes on 97 has pulled in \$1.5 million.

Detractors wail that new taxes will undercut business and drive companies out of Oregon.

An obvious scare tactic, says former Bernie supporter and Yes on Measure 97 volunteer Cims Gillespie. If that were true, he adds, Oregon would be stealing businesses away from every other state in the union with its rock-bottom corporate tax rates, and it isn't.

Bottom line, Gillespie says: "Oregon is being cheated. Tax payers are being cheated."

In his view, companies that resist paying their fair share put an untenable burden on the state, and the time for them to pony up is long past due.

Gillespie, who grew up in north Eugene, says things here have gotten much worse over his lifetime. "For all the prosperity we hear about," he says, "we're living in an age of mass poverty. Virtually everyone I know is poor."

Gillespie knows people who work full-time jobs and still qualify for food stamps. He sees crumbling infrastructure, failing schools and seniors retiring into poverty. "It's a bizarre situation," he says.

When Gillespie hears about a company making huge profits, he says he thinks: There's a company that could've paid its workers better.

Candidate Sanders challenged tax breaks that serve the wealthy. Such giveaways, he said, are all too commonplace and exist in service to a long-debunked trickle down theory that says everyone benefits when the rich prosper.

"The problem with the rising-tide-lifts-all-ships narrative is that most people don't own ships," Gillespie says, "so for them it's just more flooding."

Since the Yes on Measure 97 kick-off party earlier this month, Gillespie has scoured the city knocking on doors and striking up conversations with strangers about Measure 97.

"I feel really good about this," he says. "There are very good people working on this. And it's very important to me personally. It's a way for Oregonians to put into our tax code good stewardship practices for businesses." ■



SERENA ORSINGER

At age 15, Serena Orsinger has spent 10 years in French immersion classrooms, from kindergarten at Fox Hollow/Charlemagne through middle school at Roosevelt, to South Eugene's International High School. She's front row center in the photo. As a freshman last year, she was looking for a way to get involved in the community beyond school. "I wanted to volunteer at the hospital," she says, "but they said I was too young."

So she Googled "volunteer opportunities for 14 year olds" and found Global Leadership Adventures. "It's like Peace Corps for high schoolers," says Orsinger, who raised funds for a trip to the Dominican Republic to help build schools out of recycled materials. "What I noticed most was terrible water quality. Waterborne illness is the number-one cause of death for 1-to-4 year olds." She learned that the in-country nonprofit she worked with, 7 Elements, had a program to provide ceramic water filters to families, and she resolved to start a 7 Elements chapter at South Eugene. Its members include Thuja Wood and Emmelyn King in the back row, Connor Gabor, Sala Grady, Amelia Allen and Madeline Cottrell in front.

"The filters are made locally, so it benefits the economy," Orsinger explains. "They cost \$30 each, and if cared for can last forever. We raise money to get them made, then we'll go down and teach people how to use them." The group has raised \$1,800 so far by way of car washes and yard sales. They plan another car wash on Sept. 17 at Pizza Hut on Willamette and a benefit concert at The Jazz Station on Sept. 20, featuring Serena's dad Chris Orsinger on bass with the Gus Russell Quartet.

HAPPENING PEOPLE

BY PAUL NEEVEL