

CRANBERRY CRAVE



HISTORIC PHOTOS OF THE WEEK

Scooping Cranberries on the A. G. Fender Boats.



*Harvesting Cranberries, Chas Nelson Boy
Nahcotta, Washington.*

Craving cranberries over the winter is nothing new. The Chinook Observer shares some of its photos of local cranberry harvests in the 1920s and 30s.

Labor commissioner sets priorities of new term

On his list,
boosting
minimum wage

By PETER WONG
Capital Bureau

PORTLAND — As economic issues remain on center stage for the Oregon Legislature, newly re-elected Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian says he'll take an active role in advancing many of them during its 2015 session.

The issues range from more state grants to re-establish career and technical education in public schools to a higher state minimum wage and pay equity.

Despite Oregon's economic recovery, Avakian said, the downturn has had lingering effects on many families.

"Families still are having a hard time making ends meet, especially those who are our lowest wage workers," Avakian said in an interview Monday, only hours before he was sworn in for a second four-year term at a ceremony in Portland.

"We have come to the realization that these long-standing systemic problems have got to come to an end."

On his priority list for 2015:

- More money for state grants to public schools to re-establish career and technical education.

- An increase in Oregon's minimum wage, now \$9.25 per hour, to around \$12 to enable workers to exceed the federal



Associated Press

Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian speaks during an interview, in Portland in 2011.

poverty level.

- More legal tools to combat wage theft, when businesses fail to pay workers what they have earned.

- Several steps to implement pay equity among men and women, and minorities, including paid sick leave.

More career programs

When Avakian began his push for state grants in 2011, many public schools had dropped shop classes and other forms of career and technical education not connected with college preparation.

Four years and almost \$14 million later, more than 200 Oregon schools have re-established such programs as part of a joint effort of the Bureau of Labor and Industries, the state Department of Education, and businesses.

Avakian said it's a priority that unites Democrats and

Republicans, labor unions and businesses, and educators at all levels.

"What it really means is providing great pathways to good-paying jobs, and providing Oregon businesses with exactly what they need from good local workers to produce the goods and services they sell," he said.

"The good news is that everybody is talking about doing something and wanting to advance it."

Gov. John Kitzhaber's budget proposes money for expanded career and technical education, and Avakian says he would like to see lawmakers set aside \$50 million to continue such grants.

Minimum wage

In contrast, the looming debate about a minimum-wage increase is likely to be more contentious. Oregon's wage

THE CAPITAL BUREAU

just rose from \$9.10 to \$9.25 per hour, second only to Washington's \$9.47, as a result of an automatic linkage that voters approved in 2002 to the Consumer Price Index.

"I think it's important that our policy should be to make sure that nobody who is working full time and is raising a family is living below the federal poverty level," Avakian said.

At the current rate of \$9.25, a full-time minimum-wage worker would earn \$19,240 annually, slightly less than the \$19,790 that was the 2014 federal poverty level for a household of three. (New levels for 2015 will be announced soon.)

At a rate of \$12, that same worker would earn \$25,000, well above the federal poverty level.

Future increases, Avakian said, should continue to be linked to inflation.

Avakian said an increase would not only benefit 450,000 Oregon workers, it would give them additional purchasing power of almost \$250 million that would boost businesses.

Avakian said he isn't wedded to a figure — a Portland-based coalition wants the minimum wage to go to \$15, which Seattle will have in 2018

— but that whatever it is, it should be statewide. The coalition also wants to repeal a 2001 law that bars Oregon cities and counties from setting their own minimums.

"I am glad to see so many folks having a discussion about raising the minimum wage," he said. "It's really a sign of families still struggling. What you are really getting at is making sure that everybody has the ability to get ahead and do well."

Other priorities

Avakian said he will seek more investigators and new authority to move against businesses that fail to pay workers what they have earned.

His office received 871 claims — almost half of them from food services and construction workers — between July 2012 and June 2013 totaling more than \$3 million. The extent of wage theft may be understated, says the Oregon Center for Public Policy based in Silverton, because of worker fears about retaliation and a lack of bureau staff to investigate complaints.

Avakian said the expanded authority he seeks would allow his office to freeze bank accounts and other assets of busi-

nesses that fail to pay workers, but avoid compliance by changing their names or shifting money around.

Lawmakers in 2013 did pass a bill regulating construction labor brokers, who often are go-betweens for contractors and workers. That law takes effect July 1.

Avakian also said he wants to make good on a number of recommendations outlined a year ago by the Oregon Council on Civil Rights, which advised him on ways to achieve pay equity.

A 2011 estimate pegged the average pay of Oregon women at 79 cents for every dollar earned by men, and the gaps widened for black and Hispanic women. The national average is 77 cents.

The Oregon pay-equity law dates back to 1955, eight years before the federal law.

Among the steps Avakian wants taken are flexible work schedules, time off for parents to attend their children's events, and a requirement for paid sick leave.

A paid sick-leave bill was heard by the Oregon House in 2013 but not advanced.

Portland has had its own requirement for paid sick leave for a year; Eugene's requirement will take effect July 1.

"Uniformity is always the best way to go," Avakian said, although he will let lawmakers decide what form paid sick leave should take. "Whether it includes pre-emption (of local government) is a discussion for the Legislature to have."

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