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OPINION

Boycott Coke and Pass the Soft Drink Tax

Both actions will do public good

BY LEW CHURCH

Eleanor Greene's commentary (You Can Vote Every Day With Your Dollars, Portland Observer, Aug. 23 issue) was right on the mark. In the age of Trump, while some of us push for impeachment at the federal level, it is vital at the local level to boycott corporations that sell out workers and consumers alike, and to support progressive ballot measures community by community.

Here in Portland, we have a chance to do just that by supporting a ballot measure to appear before voters next year. The proposal is to pass a soft drink tax in Multnomah County, a much-needed step to protect our kids and our community from a perfectly legal, but nevertheless deadly substance to our health and wellbeing.

But how are soft drinks and other sugar products harmful, much less deadly, to folks in Oregon and the other 49 states? For one thing, obesity is at epidemic levels. For another, it is estimated that 30 percent of Americans, or nearly 100 million people, are either pre-diabetic or have Diabetes Type 1 or Type 2.

Like taxing cigarettes (another 'legal but deadly' product), a tax on soft drinks is a way to decrease consump-

tion, increase public resources for education and health care programs, and to encourage multinational food corporations -- like Atlanta's Coca-Cola company -- to move more quickly to make and market a healthier product. That is, to stop marketing and selling "diabetes in a bottle."

At Portland State University, our local Gray Panthers chapter believes more advocacy for the public good is needed both before the election, and possibly, afterwards, as well. That more is a boycott against all Coke products, including Coke, Tab, Sprite, Fanta, Fresca, Mello Yello, Ramblin Root Beer, Dasani, PowerAde, Minute Maid and (in a recent corporate acquisition) Vitamin Water.

But why boycott Coke products? Why not simply just vote for the soft drink tax itself? There are several reasons. The first is called Citizens United.

Longtime Oregonians, consumers and activists alike note that in our 'liberal, progressive' state, many ballot measures start out at 20 points ahead in the polls and appear to be sure bets to pass on election night -- only to fail miserably, by as much as 20 points, after a barrage of out-of-state cash embalmings and then entombs such proposals. Take Measure 97, the GM food labeling, and the fluoride ballot measure of a few years ago in Multnomah County, as examples.

Also, we know from the lies of the Trump Administration and from TV advertising paid for by Wall Street firms that all you have to do is lie often enough and long enough to convince enough swing voters in key locations (think Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania in the last presidential election) to reverse the expected outcomes of elections.

Between now and the 2018 election, Portland Gray Panthers will circulate petitions both to sign folks up to not buy Coke products, and, to vote for the soft drink tax. Depending on the outcome of the election, our coalition will then evaluate whether to consider extending the boycott any further.

A soft drink tax has been made law in several U.S. cities already, including Philadelphia, Seattle and San Francisco. Portland needs to reject some of our recent right-wing behavior and live up to our progressive reputation. A few bad actors can certainly taint Portland's image, from the deranged but still racist murders on a MAX train in May to the alt right rally in downtown Portland where some of us were dismayed to observe a Confederate flag softly blowing in the wind on the shores of the Willamette River.

One frequent alt-right argument against taxing sugar products is totally bogus: That a so-called 'sales tax' on some grocery items is somehow 'harm-

ful' to minority communities. This argument posits that it 'penalizes the poor' for low-income folks to not have the individual 'freedom' to buy sugar products, willy-nilly. This is a lie.

Coca-Cola, in particular, as the emblematic brand of global capitalism, has a long history of penalizing the poor. The American Friends Service Committee organized a boycott of Coke decades ago to protest the white power, white minority apartheid regime in Pretoria. Environmental activists have boycotted Coke to protest the company's role in opposing passage of a national bottle bill, or recycling legislation. Lastly, UK anti-slavery organizer, and progressive evangelical Christian, William Wilburforce, organized a 20-year "sugar boycott" to help end the British slave trade in the early 1800s.

Health care -- as we are witnessing in Washington, D.C. -- is at the center of a civil war now. Let's at least take back, in Multnomah County, a small part of our health care, from the false advertising and sugar-drenched profits of the Coca-Cola corporation's 'profits first, health care last' business model. As one PSU organizer has stated bluntly, "They will sell you diabetes -- and call it freedom."

Lew Church is the coordinator of the Portland Gray Panthers and founding publisher and editor of two activist Portland State University papers, the PSU Rearguard and PSU Agitator.

An Anti-Poverty Program that Makes It Pay to Work

So why won't the feds expand it?

BY ADITI KATTI

Imagine a government-funded anti-poverty tool that encouraged people to work. Now imagine that it's popular with both Democrats and Republicans, in red states and blue.

Turns out we've had just such a tool since 1975: the Earned Income Tax Credit, or EITC.

The EITC is of the most popular and effective anti-poverty tools. It's a refundable tax credit for workers in eligible low-income families, especially those with children.

The credit works on a phase in, phase-out system. Qualifying families receive more tax credits as income increases up to a certain threshold, and then slowly phases out as income increases past that point. That makes it less likely that workers will turn away jobs or raises for

fear of losing benefits.

The federal EITC helped 6.5 million low-income families in 2015, including 3.3 million children. However, the current EITC -- which tops out at around \$5,500 for families with two kids -- isn't enough to help the millions of families struggling financially. Childless workers get almost no benefit at all, and millions of single parents still struggle.

Proposals to expand the credit are popular among politicians of both parties, including Republicans Paul Ryan and Marco Rubio, Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown, and former President Obama. Their ideas include expanding the credit for childless workers and increasing the credits given to low-income families.

However, the federal government has been dragging its heels, leaving it to states to try to fill the gap. Hawaii recently adopted a state-level EITC, bringing the total to 29 (plus the District of Columbia). Others include Republican-led states like Oklahoma, Louisiana, Iowa,

and Kansas.

But the feds just can't agree on how to fund it.

At a time of extreme inequality, the best option would be to raise the funds by increasing taxes on the wealthy. In Hawaii, for example, the credit is offset by higher rates for those earning more than \$300,000 annually. More than 107,000 low-income Hawaiians are expected to benefit from this legislation.

Yet others favor raising revenue from existing taxes that hit the poorest the hardest, like gas and sales taxes.

However, this seems unfair, since people without jobs have to pay these taxes even though they don't benefit from the EITC. A better solution would be to reduce these regressive taxes and make sure wealthy individuals and large corporations pay their fair share.

Since taking office, President Trump hasn't displayed any interest in expanding the EITC.

Instead, he's sought to make it more difficult for working families to benefit by requiring that recipients provide Social Security numbers when claiming the

credit. This would make it harder for immigrant families, both documented and otherwise, to claim the credit even if they qualify for it.

Meanwhile, the president is hitting the road to campaign for tax cuts for the wealthiest. All of his tax proposals to date would significantly cut taxes for the wealthy, giving more and more breaks to corporations and their wealthy CEOs.

There were high hopes that Ivanka Trump might become a champion of such family-friendly policies. But one of her main contributions to the Trump campaign, an "affordable" childcare policy, would amount to a pitiful \$20 in help for families making under \$40,000, Bloomberg estimates. And it appears to have been removed from the Trump website.

Rather than fighting to make it more difficult to get the EITC, the Trump administration should work to expand the credit, and actually help make America great for the middle class.

Aditi Katti is a Next Leader at the Institute for Policy Studies. Distributed by OtherWords.org.

