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OUR VIEW



Congress must act to avoid port disaster

Here's a headline from the year 2020: "Longshore workers, port operators at impasse." And here's what the story will say: "A months-long work slowdown at West Coast container ports has backed up traffic, costing agricultural exporters billions of dollars in delayed and lost business, as the longshore workers union and the port operators delay negotiating a new contract."

For that matter, you can take any of the headlines the West Coast newspapers, including this one, have run during the past nine months about problems at West Coast container ports and recycle them. When the new five-year contract expires, exporters and their customers will have a sense of deja vu. All they will have to do is look at the stacks of outgoing containers and their profit-and-loss statements to see the damage done.

During the past year, both the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, which represents 13,000 West Coast dock workers, and the Pacific Maritime Association, which represents port operators and shipping lines, have amply demonstrated their inability to negotiate a new contract in a timely manner.

The financial damage to all shippers — but especially agricultural exporters — has been in the billions of dollars and put companies at risk of losing their overseas customers.

The problem at the docks was not a strike; rather it was a convoluted ILWU-choreographed Kabuki dance

in which both sides knew they had to reach an agreement, but not before putting the screws to all of their customers. Only after President Barack Obama belatedly sent his labor secretary to take part in the talks did the sides magically reach an agreement.

Only Congress can place the ports under the Railway Labor Act and prevent the union from taking action detrimental to the timely and efficient flow of goods through the port.

That's nonsense. The minute the old contract expired last year, both sides knew they would have to negotiate a new agreement. They knew an agreement would require give-and-take on the part of both sides. But they dawdled for months as union members slowed port traffic to a near-standstill.

Such drama may be OK for backwater operations, but for West Coast container ports, which handle hundreds of thousands of incoming and outgoing containers a year, it is unacceptable. The financial damage is unacceptable, and the child-like behavior is unacceptable.

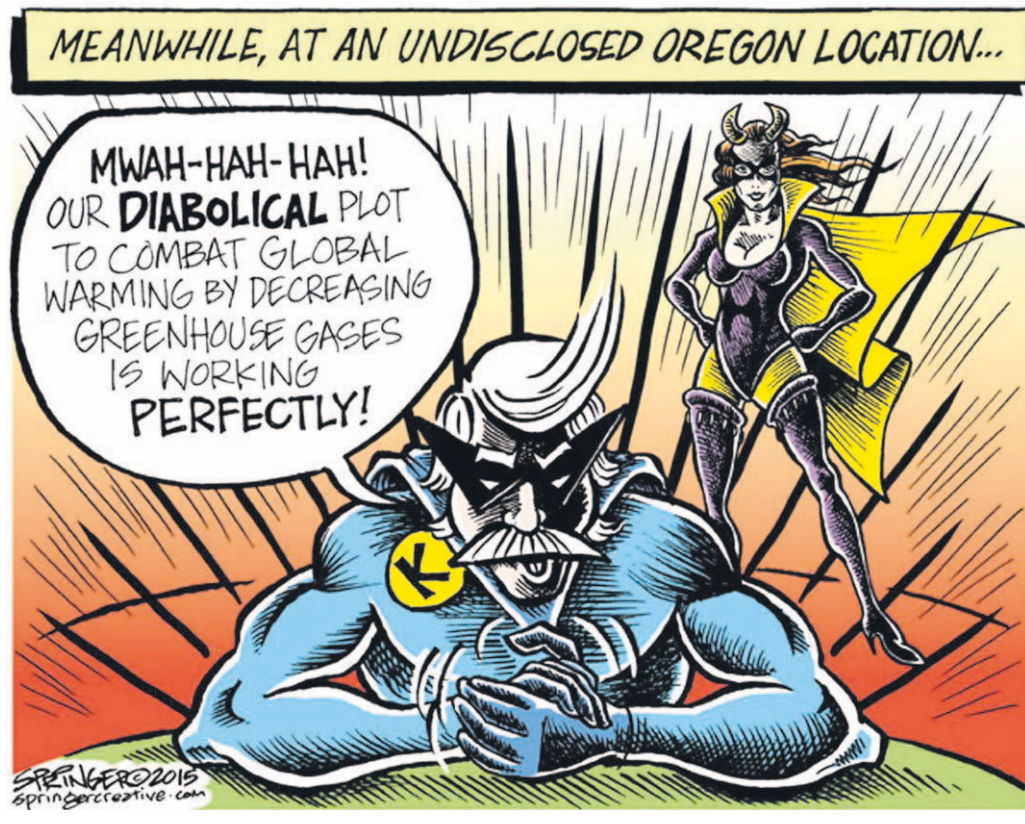
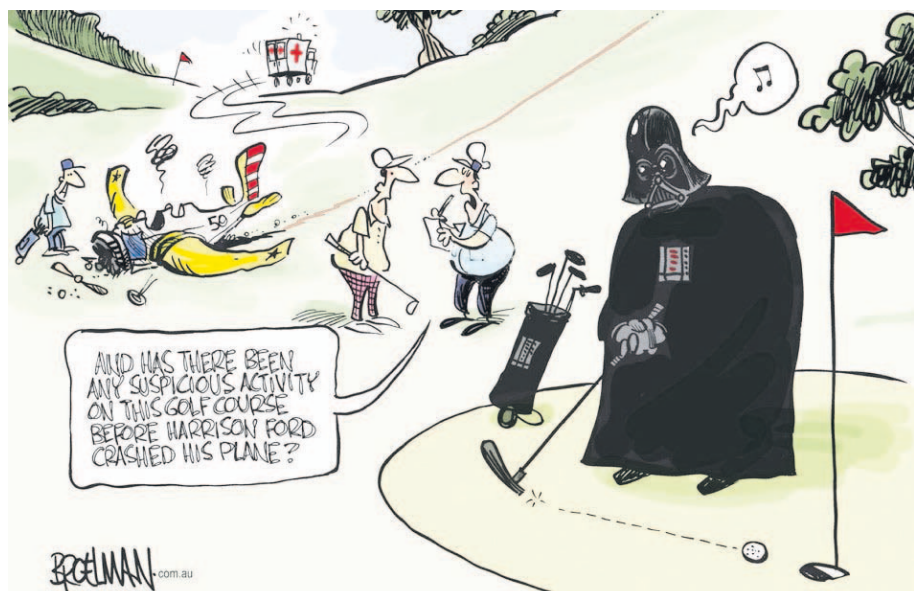
Only Congress can make sure this never happens again. It can place the ports under the Railway Labor Act and prevent the union from taking any labor action detrimental to the timely and efficient flow of containers through the ports.

Railroad workers and airline employees are already included in the law. It's time to add the port workers.

This nation cannot afford any more needless and costly drama at the ports. Congress needs to do the right thing and fix this threat to the U.S. economy.

Another disaster awaits inaction. Even a dysfunctional Congress would have to agree.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.



OTHER VIEWS

Pearls before Congress

Welcome to a whole new world. In Congress, that is. Not in the actual world. Control your expectations, for heaven's sake.

You may have noticed that in an orgy of bipartisan cooperation, Congress passed a bill this week funding the Department of Homeland Security until the fall. Then, on Wednesday, the House passed a bipartisan bill funding the Amtrak system.

And then everybody went away because it was, you know, going to snow.

But, still, bipartisan cooperation. It all started with the Senate. Republicans have been horrified to discover that whenever the now-minority Senate Democrats don't like something, they can simply filibuster, requiring 60 votes to move the bill forward. The Democrats always complained bitterly when the Republicans pulled that trick on them, but now they say the circumstances are totally different.

The Democrats demanded that the homeland security funding bill be passed without any side assaults on President Barack Obama's immigration program. And Mitch McConnell, the majority leader, eventually had to give in.

In a way, you could look at last week's homeland security crisis as similar to the reported theft of a \$150,000 gown, covered entirely in pearls, which actress Lupita Nyong'o wore to the Academy Awards. Later, the disgruntled thief called TMZ and said he had left the dress in a hotel restroom out of disgust after he had two of the pearls appraised and discovered they were fake.

So, good news is that the Department of Homeland Security is going to be funded. Also, that very attractive gown is back. The bad news is that we've now hit the point where keeping the government running sounds like a big victory. And the pearls weren't real.

Irony abounds. Who expected the Senate Republicans to be surprised when the Democrats started filibustering? Who knew dress thieves had such principled standards?

The Senate Democrats' success really ticked off the Republicans in the House, which nurtures a long and glorious tradition of hating the Senate, no matter who's in charge. (The Senate ignores the House completely.)

"If we're going to allow seven Democratic senators to decide what the agenda is ... then we might as well just give them the chairmanships, give them the leadership of the Senate," grouched Rep. Raúl Labrador.

Labrador is a leading member of a superconservative Republican caucus, which was created recently, with the apparent goal of bossing House Speaker John Boehner around.



GAIL COLLINS
Comment

In its debut performance, the caucus managed to kill a bill to fund the Department of Homeland Security for just three weeks.

It is true that Labrador is the only member of Congress with the same name as a large, friendly retriever, but he can be really strict.

Pop Quiz: After conservative Republicans killed Boehner's bill to fund the Department of Homeland Security for three weeks, Boehner realized that:

A) Homeland security isn't actually all that big a deal.

B) His own right wing was completely crazy, and, if he wanted to get through the year, he was going to have to work with the Democrats.

C) "If ands and buts were candy and nuts, every day would be Christmas."

Yes! Boehner seems to have realized that he's going to have to work with the Democrats. Also, he said that thing about the candy and nuts, but nobody really knew what he was talking about.

Both the homeland security bill and the Amtrak funding were passed with unanimous Democratic

support and huge Republican defections. The Amtrak bill, by the way, is more ambitious than your normal kicking-of-the-can-down-the-road legislation. There's money to actually improve the infrastructure, which is more than Congress has managed to come up with lately for highways and bridges. It also opens up the wonderful world of rail transit to pet dogs and cats, which I have to say is something most of us were not anticipating.

The last bit seems to be the inspiration of a California Republican who owns a French bulldog that likes to travel. It is possible the program may be limited to small animals, but we will refrain making any jokes about aggrieved Labradors.

So this appears to be the path to the future: Senate Democrats will block anything they don't like, forcing the Senate majority leader, Mitch McConnell, to compromise. In the House, the Labradorians won't vote for any Senate compromises, so Boehner will need the Democrats to pass any legislation that could actually make it into law.

Here we go — four fiscal cliffs in the offing, and if the Republican majority wants to avoid falling off any of them, they'll have to join hands with the Democrats and tango. We won't get any big, dramatic reforms, but we might avoid any big dramatic disasters.

Plus poodles on Amtrak. Who knew?

Gail Collins joined *The New York Times* in 1995 as a member of the editorial board and later as an *Op-Ed* columnist. In 2001 she became the first woman ever appointed editor of the *Times's* editorial page.



LETTERS POLICY

The East Oregonian welcomes original letters of 400 words or less on public issues and public policies for publication. The newspaper reserves the right to withhold letters. Submitted letters must be signed by the author and include a daytime phone number. Send letters to 211 S.E. Bvers Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801 or email editor@eastoregonian.com.