

The Labor Movement in Oregon Takes a Step Forward

By [Shamus Cooke](#)

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On only the second sunny weekend of the year in Portland, Oregon, 60 plus labor activists decided to spend their Saturday at the Electricians union hall (IBEW Local 48), at the United Labor Strategy Meeting — an event unlike any other happening in the country. What made the meeting unique was both its perspective and the diversity of unions that participated.

The meeting was initiated by the Stewards Council of Laborers Union, Local 483 and was endorsed by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 49 and co-sponsored by the Southwest Washington Labor Council, Painters 10, and the Mt. Hood Community College Faculty Association. Jobs With Justice helped build the event while the 51,000-member SEIU 503 sent a speaker. Many other unions were well represented also. Although the majority of attendees were rank-and-file union activists, there were several local union presidents and vice presidents, union staff organizers, regional organizers, and other union leaders present.

Ed Henderson, Business Agent of International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 10 in San Francisco, came to speak on the attack his union is facing by being sued by the Pacific Maritime Association. The employers group filed the suit because the rank-and-file members of Local 10 refused to work on April 4, 2011, as part of a national day of action in solidarity with the workers of Wisconsin.

The United Labor Strategy Meeting was based upon and was modeled after a resolution by the San Francisco Labor Council, calling on the AFL-CIO and Change to Win union federations to organize massive demonstrations to demand a federal public works/jobs program, no cuts to education and social services, no concessions by public workers, and no cuts to Social Security and Medicare, all to be paid for by taxing Wall Street and the wealthy.

The specific nature of the demands as well as their proposed solution is what separates the perspective of this meeting from others. In particular, the demands were carefully crafted to reflect the most pressing concerns of most Americans, as evidenced by poll after poll. Because of their overwhelming popularity, these are the issues that have the potential to activate millions of working people. And they have already been embraced by the AFL-CIO, which has the capacity to organize massive demonstrations. So in this respect, these demands can unite the entire labor movement and galvanize it into action.

The conference concluded with an action plan: those who attended agreed to propose resolutions in their union locals, central labor councils and state labor federations that would call on the AFL-CIO and Change to Win to organize massive demonstrations to demand that the government implement these basic, popular demands.

The focus of this conference was sharp: it avoided including a long list of demands on all types of issues that, while morally compelling to many people, are divisive within the labor movement and thus would serve as obstacles to inspiring working people to act. The purpose of this conference was to spark action, not generate a list of subjective preferences that would simply reflect the moral standing of the attendees.

Once the united labor movement is activated and mobilized for these demands, the consciousness of working people will undergo a change. Just as soldiers on the battlefield develop lifelong friendships, working people putting up a fight for demands that are in everyone's interests develop a deep camaraderie with one another. And in this context they begin to develop a deeper sympathy for the different particular types of exploitation that various sectors of the labor movement are subjected to: for example, racism, sexism, homophobia and xenophobia. This is because the united struggle of working people towards a common goal breaks down artificial and social barriers. When workers collectively fight for jobs, they'll realize that their commonality is much deeper than their differences in relation to ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, race or gender. This dynamic is the basis for truly widening labor's perspective, but it requires mobilizing to put up a fight first. For this reason, pushing unions to wage a real fight in their own defense was one of the central ideas of the Portland conference.

The labor movement is also plagued by organizational divisions, whether it be the AFL-CIO/Change to Win split or the ongoing jurisdictional squabbling that infects public sector unions, the building trades, and private sector unions. All these divisions are despised by rank-and-file workers everywhere, since they are obvious failures of union policy that negatively affect all workers' standards of living.

To help overcome divisions at the Portland meeting, breakout groups were first set up according to union sector: building trades, public workers, and private sector. These groups each discussed how barriers could be overcome between unions, what issues all unions could agree on, and how to achieve these goals. Predictably, the report-backs from the breakout groups announced that money for jobs was the main uniting demand, since building trades workers have suffered from high unemployment during the recession, while public workers are being laid off or suffer from hiring freezes, resulting in higher work loads for the remaining workforce. The breakout groups commented favorably on the San Francisco Labor Council resolution, the main principles of which were made available to all attendees at the sign-in table.

Another central focus of the breakout groups was how labor's reliance on the Democrats was preventing progress for working people, since many union leaders still believe that making deals with Democrats can bring sufficient results. However, that notion is fading rapidly as Democratic governors and Democratic politicians across the country are going after public sector workers health care and pensions, as well as bargaining rights. But as AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka explained at the National Press Club, "[w]e have a jobs crisis which after three years is still raging, squeezing families, devastating our poorest communities and stunting the futures of young adults. Yet politicians of both parties tell us

that we can — and should — do nothing.” (January 19, 2011). The Democrats’ lack of response to the Great Recession has led Trumka to also call for a strong, independent labor movement.

For an independent labor movement to be powerful enough to effect political change, labor unions must organize actions that can galvanize both labor and community groups. At the Portland meeting several strategies were discussed for unions to be more independently powerful. For example, Wisconsin-style mass demonstrations to protect public employees; labor-initiated state ballot measures that addressed the states’ deficit crises by taxing the rich; organizing public forums, door knocking, and phone banks to educate the public for the need for progressive taxation; and a protracted effort by unions for a massive public works campaign to create millions of jobs.

Again, these demands are not radical departures from the stated goals of the labor movement. The AFL-CIO has gone on record demanding that the federal government create millions of jobs by taxing Wall Street and demanding that there be no cuts to Social Security and Medicare, while arguing that the best way to fight the deficit is to create jobs. The California Teachers Association is waging an aggressive campaign to tax the wealthy, which, if enacted, would bring \$20 billion of revenue into California’s budget. National Nurses United (NNU) is demanding that Wall Street pay for the Great Recession, with slogans such as: “Heal America! Tax Wall Street!” It recently opened a campaign to push for this demand, as reported by the San Francisco Chronicle: “‘It’s not about Obama or the Republicans – it’s about the system,’ said [NNU President] DeMoro, who wants to narrow the power gap between the wealthiest Americans and everyone else. ‘You can’t accomplish that by going through the political parties.’” (June 24, 2011).

The purpose of the Portland meeting was for union activists in Oregon and Washington to encourage their unions to wage an aggressive fight for these demands. Oregon already has the experience of labor unions working together to pass a temporary “tax the rich and corporations” bill by means of a statewide ballot measure that helped close the gap of the deficit of the previous budget. Although the mainstream Oregon media said that the law would never pass, unions pursued a determined campaign to explain the growing inequalities in wealth and the declining tax rates of the wealthy and the corporations. Union activists were energized by the campaign and filled phone banks to the brim to educate others about it. But a new budget deficit in Oregon requires that a new, permanent tax be implemented, to protect both social services and the wages and benefits of public workers.

At the end of the Portland meeting an action plan was adopted. The strategy of the conference was for attendees to agree to organize within their unions to pass resolutions modeled on the one passed by the San Francisco Labor Council. Using the resolution as an organizing tool, attendees were encouraged to talk with their co-workers, stewards, and leadership about working to put the ideas of the resolution into action. A continuations committee was announced and a majority of the attendees agreed to attend future meetings to encourage their unions to ignite a campaign to achieve these demands. At the end of the day all present were inspired by their experience and were excited about working with the committee to make future victories possible. The meeting in Portland was in many ways an example for other cities to follow. Similar strategy meetings could be held, organized over similar principles, with the overall goal to unite the labor movement over demands that will certainly spur their members into action.

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