



Legislative UPDATE

A weekly report from the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO



JAN. 5, 2007

Vol. XXII, No. 1

It's time to 'Get It Done!'

The 2007 session convenes Monday with a new State Legislature—one with significantly stronger Democratic majorities in both houses. House Speaker Frank Chopp extends his 55-43 majority to 62-36, and Senate Majority Leader Lisa Brown goes from a 26-23 majority, salted with a caucus-splintering "maverick" or two, to a solid 32-17 working majority.

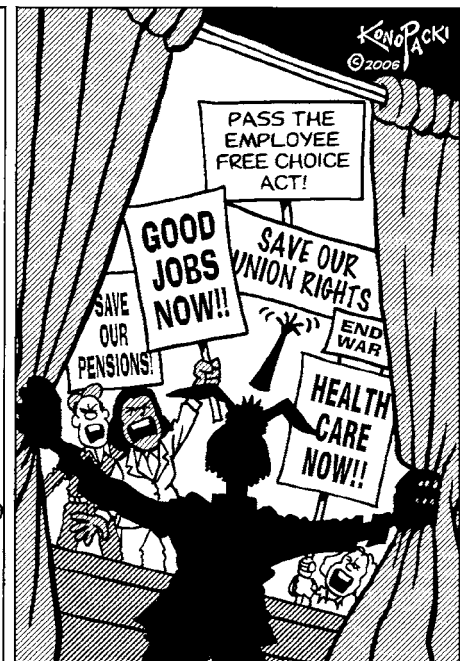
The nation's Democratic election sweep had a lot to do with dissatisfaction with the Bush administration and Congress. But it's too simplistic to suggest that Washington state's fiercely independent voters just let that national anger trickle down their ballots.

State Democrats fielded a truly excellent slate of legislative candidates in 2006. And some credit must go to effective political action and voter turnout by progressives, including organized labor's grassroots activism led by many of you who receive this newsletter.

But let's also credit their consistent platform and message. Almost without exception, Democratic candidates focused on jobs, education and—what we believe was the most effective issue of all—health care. Those of you who went door-to-door or phonebanked fellow union members as part of the Washington State Labor Council's Labor Neighbor activities know what we're talking about. The issue of health care costs and insecurity inspired some of the most heartfelt stories and pent-up rage of any subject. Statistics about the rising numbers of uninsured, medical-related bankruptcies, or percentages of income devoted to health costs just don't do the issue justice (although we'll do our best to bombard you with them throughout the session).

It suffices to say that, on health care, staying the course is no longer a viable option. And while organized labor strongly supports state Democrats' noble efforts to date—including covering more, and eventually all, of the state's uninsured children—with the strong Democratic majorities in both houses, it's time to go a step or two further, and not simply rehash old debates. It's time to get it done!

Get what done? Hey, thanks for asking...



Stop the bleeding, then treat the patient

The Washington State Labor Council will support the 2007 legislative package of the Fair Share Health Care Coalition, a group of labor, business, health-provider and religious interests working together to expand access to health care coverage in our state. Its agenda includes funding for the Small Employer Health Insurance Partnership program established last year, expanding available slots in the Basic Health Program, continuing efforts to cover uninsured children, and yes, a bill that gives large businesses a choice: either pay a reasonable percentage of their payroll toward health coverage for their employees, or pay a fee to the state to assist in providing more coverage for uninsured adults. The Coalition also supports requiring large employers whose employees are on taxpayer-subsidized health programs to pay the state for that coverage unless they meet a similar minimum standard for the provision of employee health care.

At Wednesday's Associated Press forum, Governor

(CONTINUED ON BACK)

Christine Gregoire and several legislative leaders were asked by reporters whether they planned to move a "Wal-Mart bill" similar to last year's. Gregoire and Speaker Chopp reiterated their reasons for opposing last year's bill. Specifically, they had concerns about effectiveness and constitutionality of a bill they felt targeted a single company. Both expressed a desire for more comprehensive action.

The WSLC has met with both Governor Gregoire and Speaker Chopp and assured them this year's Fair Share bill will be significantly broader and that efforts have been made to address their concerns. Chopp, in particular, has expressed a willingness to work with the Fair Share Coalition on this effort. He shares our concern about stopping the erosion of health care coverage by discouraging big employers from shifting their employees onto state-subsidized health plans. But Chopp still feels strongly that we must look for ways to work toward universal coverage as opposed to bolstering the crumbling employer-provided health care system.

We couldn't agree more. The unions that comprise the Washington State Labor Council are clearly on record as supporting universal health care, and we look forward to working with Speaker Chopp and others who have innovative new ideas about how this can be accomplished. As we did with our indexed minimum wage, Washington state has the ability to lead the nation on health security issues and to create and protect good jobs by relieving employers of some of this health-cost albatross.

But in the meantime, the Coalition strongly feels that transitional steps must be taken to alleviate unnecessary suffering under our current system caused by lack of coverage for hundreds of thousands of Washingtonians, and the erosion of benefits for those who do have coverage. In addition, steps must be taken to address the unfair competitive advantage certain employers have gained by deliberately shifting their health costs onto taxpayers. It's killing good jobs among employers struggling to do the right thing for their employees, it's promoting the erosion of coverage, and it's creating higher health costs for all businesses and workers.

The Fair Share bill's details are still being worked out, but there is already broad legislative support for its concept and goals. The Coalition looks forward to working with the Governor, Speaker Chopp and other legislative leaders to resolve their concerns and move this legislation forward.

Freedom to choose unionization on agenda

A new study affirms what organized labor has said for some time: illegal firings of activists during union organizing campaigns has increased significantly and is a significant factor in the overall decline in union membership.

"Starting at the end of the 1970s, but especially by the early 1980s, American employers began to engage in the

systematic and widespread use of illegal firings as a strategy to undermine the success of campaigns for union representation," reports the non-profit Center for Economic and Policy Research in a study released Thursday based on its analysis of National Labor Relations Board data.

In America, we are supposed to have freedom of association and the right to bargain for a contract with our employer. But many workers, particularly in the private sector, have lost the freedom to choose for themselves whether they want to bargain for better wages and working conditions because their employers harass, intimidate and fire union supporters with relative impunity.

Fixing our nation's broken labor laws and restoring the freedom to choose unions is Priority #1 for the AFL-CIO. In Congress, those efforts focus on passage of the Employee Free Choice Act, labor law reform that has been co-sponsored by, among many others, both Sens. Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell and U.S. Reps. Jay Inslee, Rick Larsen, Brian Baird, Norm Dicks, Jim McDermott and Adam Smith. But the Bush administration is likely to block this effort.

So, as in the case of national health care reform, our state need not, and must not wait. The Washington State Labor Council will be supporting critically important legislation that, to the extent the state can, protects Washington workers' freedom of association and discourages illegal employer suppression of union activity. Stay tuned for details....

Other important issues...

As the bills drop and hearings are scheduled, look for more details in this newsletter and at www.wslc.org on the following WSLC legislative agenda items:

FAMILY LEAVE INSURANCE—Last year's effort to establish Family Leave Insurance for all Washington workers who must temporarily leave their jobs to care for newborn and adopted children or for sick family members passed the Senate but stalled in the House. The WSLC will again support this.

ELECTION REFORM—Legislation to protect the integrity of our citizens' initiative process is in the works, and other election-related bills will be described in future newsletters.

WORKERS' COMPENSATION—Look for legislation regarding independent medical exams, voc-rehab reform, hour-bank issues, increasing the minimum benefit, and other issues supported by the Workers' Compensation Labor Caucus.

PAY-DAY LOANS—The WSLC will support efforts to curtail predatory lending practices while preserving workers' access to so-called payday loans.

The WSLC will be supporting legislation on Unemployment Insurance and many other important issues, as well. And as always, we will be supporting the efforts of individual affiliated unions to achieve their legislative goals.