



WSLC

Legislative Update

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



Reminder: We won, they lost

Bush-era policies wrecked economy, but still pushed by WA business groups

In a recent meeting with Congressional Republicans about the federal stimulus package, our new president left no doubt who was in charge of the negotiations. President Barack Obama matter-of-factly summed up, "I won."

Naturally, the right-wing blogosphere went apoplectic with rage over Obama's egregious statement of fact. These are the same folks who just a few short months ago accused Obama of being a closet Muslim who pals around with terrorists. But now they are shocked—shocked!—that he would sound so dismissive of their demands for more corporate tax cuts in the stimulus.

If anything, Obama's comment was gentle in reminding the assembled partisan relics that the George W. Bush era of cure-all tax cuts and laissez-faire corporate deregulation is over. Now begins a new era of progressive pro-active government measured by its effectiveness, not its size. (Although, as understaffed public agencies would remind us: sometimes, size does matter.)

"What the cynics fail to understand is that the ground has shifted beneath them," Obama said in his inaugural speech, "that the stale political arguments that have consumed us for so long, no longer apply."

Which brings us to the stale political arguments that we continue to hear from Washington state's business lobbying groups. The Association of Washington Business, the National Federation of Independent Businesses, and the echo chamber of other corporate lobbying groups and the policy think tanks they fund have devoted considerable time and effort lately to warning Gov.

Chris Gregoire and Democratic legislative leaders not to do anything remotely progressive.

Prefacing every argument with, "Now, in the midst of a recession, is not the time...", they argue against boosting unemployment benefits, against paid family leave, against establishing a minimum standard for workplace privacy, against efforts to improve access to health care coverage, and against even considering the repeal of any of the hundreds of tax preferences now enjoyed by specific industries and businesses.

What are they for? Ending voter-mandated minimum wage increases, freezing state employee wages and perhaps increasing their out-of-pocket health care costs, and passing an all-cuts budget that punishes our state's most vulnerable citizens who rely on state services to survive and that takes away health care coverage for thousands of families.

Well, we had something called an election a couple months ago. John McCain and Dino Rossi, the candidates who won these business

groups' endorsement by supporting the continuation of Bush's failed anti-government policies, LOST. It wasn't even close. And no, the election's outcome wasn't simply a failure to properly "market" these ideas as some suggest.

More than any other single factor, pollsters say the election's outcome was the impact of a national economic catastrophe that the public recognizes was sown by corporate excess, malfeasance and greed, and enabled by an ineffective government that deliberately looked the other way. For the first time since the Reagan era, Americans are questioning and rejecting the government-cutting anti-regulatory ideology still actively espoused by these business lobbying groups.

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WSLC Legislative Conference will be Feb. 26

Leaders, staffers and rank-and-file members of WSLC-affiliated unions are invited to get a progress report on labor's legislative agenda at the Washington State Labor Council's 2009 Legislative Conference, from 8:30 a.m. to lunchtime on Thursday, Feb. 26 at the Olympia Red Lion Hotel. As always, there will be a reception from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. the preceding evening on Wednesday, Feb. 25 at the hotel with many legislators and other state officials in attendance. The conference registration fee, which includes materials, lunch and one admission to the reception, is \$50. Get more information, including registration forms, at www.wslc.org.

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They lost. Working people are tired of waiting for the benefits of corporate tax-cutting and deregulation to trickle down to them. What's been trickling on us lately ain't good.

Democrats in Olympia were elected because people want their government to protect their rights, safety, health and standard of living. The public has given them a mandate for progressive action aimed at helping working people.

You won. We won. It's time to be bold.

Worker Privacy Act hearings this Tuesday

The Worker Privacy Act is scheduled for public hearings this Tuesday, Feb. 3 at 10 a.m. in the House Commerce and Labor Committee and at 1:30 p.m. in the Senate Labor, Commerce & Consumer Protection Committee.

The Worker Privacy Act (HB 1528 and SB 5446) would allow workers to choose whether or not to participate in employer communication on issues of individual conscience, including politics, religion, charitable giving, and unionization. Its passage is the Washington State Labor Council's top legislative priority for the 2009 session.

The legislation has amazingly strong support right out of the gate with 47 sponsors in the House and 21 sponsors in the Senate. Please take a moment to call and thank the following sponsors on the Legislative Hotline at 1-800-562-6000:

HB 1528, prime sponsored by Rep. Mike Sells (D-Everett):

Sherry Appleton	Bob Hasegawa	Timm Ormsby
Brian Blake	Zack Hudgins	Tina Orwall
Tom Campbell	Sam Hunt	Dave Quall
Maralyn Chase	Christopher Hurst	Mary Helen Roberts
Eileen Cody	Jim Jacks	Christine Rolfes
Steve Conway	Ruth Kagi	Sharon Tomiko Santos
Jeannie Darneille	Phyllis Kenney	Larry Seaquist
Mary Lou Dickerson	Steve Kirby	Geoff Simpson
Hans Dunshee	John McCoy	Pat Sullivan
Deborah Eddy	Mark Miloscia	Dean Takko
Mark Ericks	Jim Moeller	Kevin Van De Wege
Fred Finn	Dawn Morrell	Deb Wallace
Dennis Flannigan	Jeff Morris	Scott White
Roger Goodman	Sharon Nelson	Brendan Williams
Tami Green	Al O'Brien	Alex Wood
Kathy Haigh		

SB 5446, prime sponsored by Sen. Margarita Prentice (D-Renton):

Darlene Fairley	Claudia Kauffman	Eric Oemig
Rosa Franklin	Karen Keiser	Craig Pridemore
Karen Fraser	Adam Kline	Kevin Ranker
Brian Hatfield	Jeanne Kohl-Welles	Debbie Regala
Steve Hobbs	Rosemarie McAuliffe	Paull Shin
Ken Jacobsen	Joe McDermott	Rodney Tom
Jim Kastama	Ed Murray	

Making us gag...

Speaking of the Worker Privacy Act (WPA) and the state business lobbyists—capped teeth a-gleamin'—who oppose it,

the Association of Washington Business is calling it a "gag rule" on employer speech. They cite the U.S. Supreme Court decision in June 2008 (*Chamber of Commerce v. Brown*) as evidence that this bill has been dealt with already.

Wrong and wrong.

There is nothing in the WPA that prohibits employers from freely speaking to their workers about whatever issues they choose, even issues of individual conscience like religion, politics, charitable giving and unionization. They just can't force workers to listen under threat of firing or discipline.

The *Brown* decision is a totally different issue about requiring employers who receive state assistance to remain neutral in union organizing efforts. The court found this California law to be preempted by the National Labor Relations Act and that the law's onerous enforcement mechanism along with punitive penalties and burdensome recordkeeping requirements effectively constituted undue pressure on the employer to forego their free speech rights.

Don't dilute federal economic stimulus dollars

Reading new layoff announcements every day highlights the need for us to pass a state emergency stimulus plan as quickly as possible. The federal package has provisions to put an additional \$87 a month in food stamps into the hands of the most needy, \$11 billion in Medicaid to cover unemployed workers and their family members, and a provision to temporarily cover 65% of COBRA costs for unemployed workers who have the right to extend health care coverage from their previous employment. It also provides an additional \$25-per-week to unemployed workers.

This is great news, if Republicans in Congress don't kill it by blocking a vote, but it's important that state lawmakers not dilute this package by supplanting state dollars with federal dollars. Gov. Gregoire's emergency economic stimulus plan provides an additional \$45-a-week to all unemployed workers. So the combined state and federal effect would be to increase weekly unemployment checks by \$70. Along with food stamps, this is the fastest way to get money circulating on Main Street.

Unemployed workers and their families are hurting. A survey of unemployed claimants done a few years ago by the Employment Security Department found 38% of them said that unemployment benefits were their sole source of family income and 62% said that the benefits were a major source of their family income. These additional benefits will keep people from losing houses and cars, they will keep the lights and heat on, and they will put adequate food on the table.

House Speaker Frank Chopp also wants to increase the checks for those receiving the least amount of unemployment benefits. This is a fine idea, so long as by doing this, the time available for them to collect benefits is not shortened.

The sooner the legislature passes the stimulus package the sooner we will be able to jumpstart the economy and the sooner working families will receive some relief.