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The Washington Connection

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The Assault on Labor Reaches New Heights

The outcome of the 2010 state and federal legislative elections was not surprising when you consider that our country was still dealing with the aftermath of a recessionary economy, huge unemployment numbers and astronomical state and federal budget deficits. Voters were angry and wanted change, no matter what the cost. Unfortunately for the labor movement, the effects of last year's elections will be remembered for years to come.

Across the country, at both state and national levels, candidates were elected who had one objective in mind: to destroy everything labor had fought for over the past 70 years. Under the pretense of solving state budget shortfalls, legislators viciously attacked public-employee unions, blaming their “extravagant” pension and health and welfare plans for the state's budget deficits, and in doing so, taking away their right to collectively bargain in the future.

Although the brunt of anti-union legislation was targeted towards public-employee unions, many bills targeting all of labor were introduced. Right-to-work legislation has popped up in a handful of states with union security clauses, under the guise that collective bargaining prohibits economic development. Bans on project labor agreements (PLAs) on public-works projects have been proposed in numerous jurisdictions. Even worse, some have called for eliminating state prevailing wage laws, insinuating that these laws increase overall labor costs.

Everything the labor movement fought for to provide working men and women a chance to achieve some semblance of a middle class life is at risk. Anti-worker legislation of various degrees was introduced and/or passed in states too numerous to list. As of March 1, at least a dozen states had proposed laws stripping public employees of collective bargaining and other rights. The most-targeted states, based on union density, were Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana and Missouri. These states suffered an onslaught of anti-worker legislation including right-to-work laws, elimination of PLAs or prevailing wages on public projects, and bans on collective bargaining for public employees. But what began as an assault on the

public-employee unions has now become an attack on the entire labor movement.

Union membership in this country has dropped to an all-time low of 11.9%, with approximately 51% of those members represented by public-sector unions. Organized labor cannot sustain these losses. Even though a lot of anti-union legislation has been blocked thanks to relentless efforts of local union leaders, members and pro-labor legislators, there simply were not enough “friendly” lawmakers to defeat the destructive bills in Wisconsin and Ohio.

The gains organized labor has achieved over the years—the forty-hour work week, OSHA and our right to organize, to name a few—were realized because we elected legislators who support working-class ideals. These same gains can be legislated away in an instant, as proven over the past few months. Simply put, what took us years to gain was destroyed in a few weeks. Therefore our survival is dependent upon our ability to elect legislators at all levels of government who will stand behind working men and women.

The legislative and political process must become an important aspect of every local union, and most importantly, the membership. I strongly encourage all of our locals to prepare for the 2012 elections. Based on the fallout of last November's elections, it is essential that we focus all possible resources to electing candidates who will support our agenda. I encourage all locals to develop a political program that consists of the following:

- **Membership education – Educate our members on all local and national legislative issues pertinent to their job or the union and the positive or adverse effects the issues will have on their lives.**
- **Voter registration – Encourage and assist our members in voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts on Election Day.**
- **Membership mobilization – Encourage our members to participate in all events that support the legislative process. The rallies held at the Indiana, Ohio and Wisconsin state capitols were a good example of mobilization.**
- **Endorse and support qualified candidates for office.**

Remember, the same political process that gave us the ability to enjoy benefits at work can take them away. This is why we as a union need to participate in the process: it is not only for the survival of the Roofers Union, but for the middle-class values we have gained over the past century. ■