

Portland Spectator

Getting Oregon Back to Work

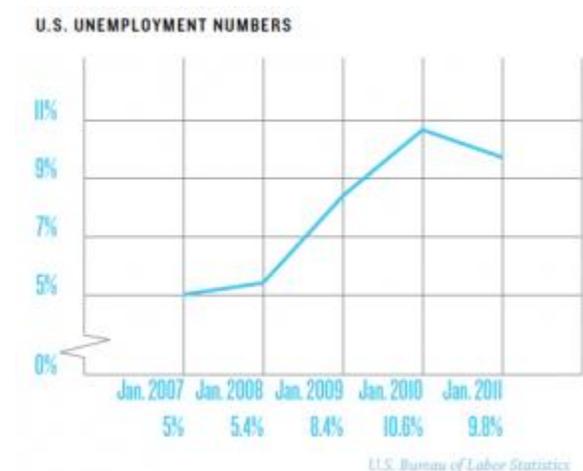
March 8th, 2011 in

“Oregon Wants to Work” designed to help unemployed be their own advocates

Michael Munkvold

A crowd of roughly 70 people gathered at Portland Community College’s Portland Metropolitan Workforce Training Center to watch a presentation of ideas for a burgeoning program. Mostly, however, people came just to talk, to share their pain, frustration and fear for the future with others facing unemployment in a dismal economy. On Feb. 16, the Oregon chapter of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations held the first session of the new program, Oregon Wants to Work, designed to help unemployed and underemployed people network and advocate for better employment opportunities.

“A lot of times when you’re laid off, you feel like you’re on an island by yourself,” said one of the attendees, who asked to be identified only by his first name, Bob. “It’s good to know other people are going through it too, and to share information with them.”



It can be painful to hear these stories. During the session, organizers asked the audience to stand up if they have been affected by a series of work-related problems such as being unemployed for more than six months, being forced to take a job with a greatly reduced salary after being laid off from their previous position or facing foreclosure. One by one, everyone in the audience eventually stood up.

One audience member, Pat, who declined to give her last name, is a typical example: Last year, she was laid off from her management job at Qwest’s Oregon branch, and hasn’t been able to find work since. She is now in danger of losing her house.

“I truly believe that the company laid us off because we were over 50,” said Pat, who is 55. “We were top-paid, and they pushed us out. People who are over 50 have a really hard time finding work. [Employers] see a resume that says you have 30 years experience at a company, and they won’t even look at it.”

Combating the Vicious Cycle

Oregon AFL-CIO Communications Director Elana Guiney characterized unemployment in Oregon, which is currently at 10 percent, as a vicious cycle: People who are out of work put less money into the economy, which ultimately hampers job creation.

“We’re in this downward spiral where unemployed people are spending less, which hurts the public and private sector, so businesses don’t hire,” Guiney said.

The outlook is just as bleak for students who work, said Lee Mercer, Education and Outreach Coordinator for the Oregon Center for Public Policy. When state governments cut education funds, he says, students have fewer resources available to help them succeed in the work world after graduation.

“We’re concerned about impending cuts to education at all levels,” said Mercer. “In an almost-Depression, it’s important to keep public spending up to support the markets which students need to find jobs.”

Mercer said that, in his opinion, part of the problem is businesses that take state tax credits for moving to Oregon then move their business out of state a few years later, which typically results in layoffs.

“The State of Oregon gives all this money to companies in the form of tax credits without real criteria of what they’re going to do with public funds,” Mercer said.

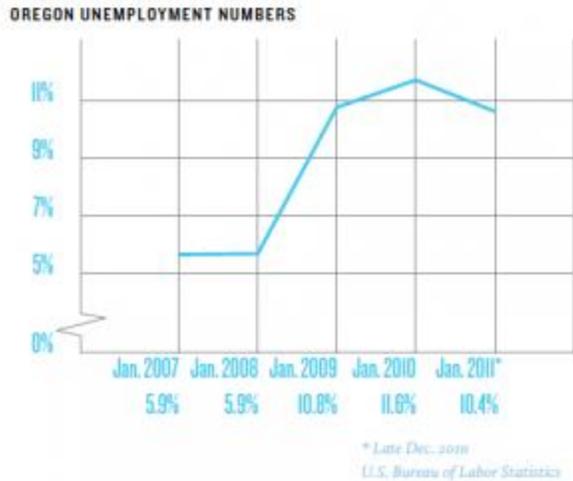
Guiney agreed with this assessment, saying, “Start-up companies arrive here, stay for four or five years, and leave, taking the jobs with them.”

Oregon Wants to Work is ready to combat these problems, Guiney said.

“As we work to get the job market going again, it will be really helpful for people getting into the job world,” she said.

The program is presently in its beginning stages, said Guiney. It is yet to be determined what concrete actions it is to take in its advocacy. During the meeting, the audience identified several issues they need help with, including networking, job hunting and navigating the unemployment process. Guiney suggested a few other ideas to the *Spectator*, including encouraging people to shop at locally-owned businesses to stimulate the state economy, advocating for more public projects and examining both individual and state spending habits.

“None of these [ideas] are magic bullets, but they’re a start,” Guiney said.



Rally for Jobs

Another milestone for the program was the Rally for Jobs, a gathering at the steps of the Capitol Building in Salem on March 7. The rally featured a job training seminar, a speech by Governor John Kitzhaber detailing his agenda for creating jobs, and group discussions on issues facing the unemployed. Most of all, Guiney said, the rally was an opportunity for unemployed people to make their voices heard at a statewide level.

“We would love to see people at the rally come together to talk about how the economic crisis is affecting them, and then start advocating for some real change,” she said in advance of the rally.

Oregon Wants to Work is also managed by Working America, Northwest Labor Council and Labor’s Community Services as part of a five-state pilot program created by the national AFL-CIO which also has chapters in eight other states across the country. The program is primarily designed to help unemployed people be their own advocates, said Oregon AFL-CIO Field Director Graham Trainor.

“The program is meant to be very participant-driven and grassroots,” said Trainor. “[Union groups] got together and said, ‘We care about all unemployed people, not just our people.’”

The program is currently slated to last for six months, with monthly discussion meetings and networking sessions. The next event is scheduled for March 26, at a time and place to be determined.

“We want a community outlet for unemployed people to advocate for themselves, as well as official advocates [working on their behalf],” said Guiney. “We in this organization will certainly help, but in the end we want them to have a community to share experiences and information.”

Oregon Wants to Work may be a young program, said Trainor, but it knows what it wants.

“We want to provide a forum where people feel safe and feel their voices are heard,” he said. “These people feel isolated, so we’re going to work to provide them with as many resources as we can. We’re just a facilitator.”

For more information, visit www.oregonwantstowork.com.