

This time last year

So, wondering what our union has done lately? Consider where we were at this time last year.

Killing CI-97. This time last year, we were running hard against CI-97, the out-of-state funded, fraudulent scheme to divest state government of the ability to pay for the things we do: public education, public health and human services, public safety, and a myriad of other vital public programs and services.

With help from NEA and AFT, we challenged CI-97 in media markets and in the courts, and we won. MEA-MFT members made all the difference.

Raising the minimum wage. This time last year, the Montana minimum wage was \$5.15 an hour. Today, because of us as much as anyone, the minimum wage is \$6.15 and destined to grow soon to the newly established federal minimum wage of \$7.25 plus annual inflationary increases. Yes, we do represent folks who work at or close to the minimum wage.

Protecting retirement. This time last year, the Montana teachers' and public employees' defined benefit retirement systems were mired in unfunded liability. Today, with the help of Governor Brian Schweitzer and the 2007 state legislature, both systems are on their way to actuarial soundness.

We will never surrender defense of our retirement plans anymore than we will surrender Medicare and Social Security.

This time last year, the employer contribution to the so-called "optional retirement plan"—or ORP—that a growing majority of Montana university faculty suffer was a miserly 4.96%. At our exclusive urging, the 2007 Legislature upped the employer contribution 1%.

We have more to do. The employer contribution to the ORP remains one of the lowest, most embarrassing in the nation. But the increase we secured is the first since the adoption of the ORP 20 years ago.

Passing the state pay plan. This time last year, the state pay plan we bargained with Governor Schweitzer and lobbied through the 2005 Legislature was one of the largest in history. Fortu-

nately, in concert with the Montana Public Employees Association, we bargained and lobbied another significant pay plan increase through the 2007 Legislature.

As a result, state employees will receive an increase in pay an unprecedented four years in a row. With this governor and the next legislature and the next, we intend to make that six and then eight.

Funding full-time kindergarten. This time last year, there was no state funding of full-time kindergarten.

Today, again thanks to Governor Schweitzer, Superintendent Linda McCulloch, and hundreds of MEA-MFT members wading in to support our lobbying efforts, 86% of all eligible kindergarten age children have access to full-time kindergarten. Hopefully by this time next year, every elementary school district will provide access to all our young students.

Electing Jon Tester. This time last year, Conrad Burns was still a U.S. Senator. Today, Jon Tester, a real Montanan in touch with what we do—along with long-time friend U.S. Senator Max Baucus—represents us in the U.S. Senate. We stand right up close to the front of a long line of folks who claim responsibility for Tester's close election.

Restoring balance in the Montana Legislature. This time last year, after 15 years of hard-edged Republican control, Democrats and Republicans shared seats and power in the 2005 Montana House of Representatives.

Unfortunately, last November Republicans narrowly reassumed sole and arbitrary control. Aided and abetted by the election of the only Constitutionalist anywhere in the nation, the 2007 House dived into a bitterly partisan, toxic swirl of bad ideas and failed good ones.

We cannot let this happen again. It remains our duty to recruit and elect legislators determined to defend and fund what we do.

This time last year, our union was hard at work. Our product speaks for itself. With our members' continued support and engagement, we promise more of the same.

Regards and thanks to all. ■



BY ERIC FEAYER
MEA-MFT PRESIDENT

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