

## Labor bureau commissioner aids workers, businesses

HENRY MILLER Statesman Journal  
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For Labor Day, it seemed appropriate to talk to Brad Avakian, Oregon's new commissioner of the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries.

A civil-rights attorney for a decade and a half and a longtime state senator from Portland, Avakian was selected in March by Gov. Ted Kulongoski to fill the vacancy after the resignation of Dan Gardiner.

Question: Looking at the stories written at the time, there was a very short time between (Gardiner's resignation) and your selection.

Answer: It was in terms of hours, not days.

Q: Was it a surprise when Kulongoski tapped you to take the job?

A: It was a very quick change of direction for us ... and we didn't know that Dan Gardiner was going to resign, so it was a surprise.

I was very glad to get the call from the governor because for 15 years I had practiced civil-rights and employment law, so this was a very good fit for everybody to have me do this.

Q: What was the biggest surprise when you took the job?

A: The biggest surprise has been that we have this Technical Assistance Unit, which exists in order to help employers navigate their way through the state and federal employment laws.

It's a great service, but for the most part, it isn't free.

We charge for seminars, and that surprised me, that it wasn't funded by the general fund so we could just provide it as a service to employers.

And it should be. Employers who have to follow state laws should have that without having to pay for it.

Q: So does that fall under things you'd most like to see changed?

A: Yes, in the long term.

Q: So what are some of the more immediate concerns? Things such as the current economic situation?

A: It is ... I suppose that I'd place it second on the list, though.

But the lack of adequate revenue, you know, so that we can aggressively enforce both individual rights through our Civil Rights



Avakian

### Brad Avakian

Full Name: Bradley Paul Avakian

Born: Feb. 4, 1961, in Fresno, Calif. The family moved to the Portland area when he was 9.

Home: The Bethany area in unincorporated Washington County between Hillsboro and Beaverton

Wife: Debbie, a human resources administrator at Providence Hospital, Portland

Children: Son Nathan, 17, attends the Arts and Communications Magnet Academy, a public school in Beaverton; daughter Claire, 15, a student at Westview High School

Education: Bachelor of Science degree in psychology in 1984 from Oregon State University; Juris Doctor degree in 1990 from Lewis and Clark Law School

Hobbies: It's a sad thing, but my favorite hobbies of flyfishing and backpacking and playing baseball occur rarely anymore. Political life does that to you.

Quotable: And two dogs, if you need that, Rosie and Jazzy, mother and daughter. ...

Division in wage and hour and also support employers through our Technical Assistance Division, that's a challenge.

They're Bernese mountain dogs. They both weigh about 100 pounds, and they both like sitting on your lap.

The result of it is that we don't have the resources to just get the people and businesses everything they need and to let them know that we exist in order to help them is the real challenge.

And we've got to get the word out for that.

Q: What's the biggest misconception that people have about the bureau?

A: Many people believe that the bureau exists only to serve organized labor. And the truth is that it exists to serve employee rights, but it equally exists in order to support businesses in Oregon.

Q: On that theme, what would you most like the public to know about the bureau?

A: People need to know first, whether you're a business or an individual, that we're very accessible. We exist to serve the public.

But especially when you're enforcing individual rights — civil rights — people have to know there's a safe place that they can go in order to have those rights protected. And we are able to prosecute violations of civil rights and wage-and-hour claims.

The other is that Oregon is very lucky to have a business community that I think in large part cares very much for its employees.

But the laws are just very difficult to know and follow sometimes. But to have a public agency that's available to help you navigate your ways through those laws is a pretty remarkable thing.

And I would want to make sure that not only every employer knows we exist for that purpose ... and they can call in for free, but that we would be able to go out to visit and do seminars and train their supervisors for free, as well.

Q: What do you like most about the job?

A: You know, I guess I would phrase it this way: It's a very positive and optimistic job.

I mean if I summarize it, there are two things that I need to do.

One is to protect the key individual rights of workers.

And the other is to help Oregon businesses succeed.

And frankly, those are two very necessary and great things to be able to do.

Q: What are some of the biggest challenges that you see in the future? We've covered a lot of them already, but anything that you see coming up, say in the Legislature next year?

A: There will be something incredibly important.

Part of what this agency also does is certify the apprenticeship training programs around the state. And we have a very large hand in the state's work force development.

And there will be a renewed effort this next legislative session by us, legislators, the governor to make the work force development system in Oregon much more effective.

And both with the targeting of dollars and with matching the needs of employers to the type of training programs that we have whether it be community colleges or K-12 or apprenticeship programs.

You've got three segments of industries in Oregon.

You've got the existing industries, you've got emerging industries, such as renewable energy and some segments of the health care field. And then you've got our traditional industries of timber, agriculture and fishing.

And we used to have work force programs throughout the state that supported all three of those, and especially those last three, fishing and timber and agriculture.

The 4-H and Future Farmers of America programs we used to have in the K-12 system can barely survive anymore.

The career and technical education that we used to have in our high schools and middle schools are almost nonexistent.

These are things that we have to restore.

And if we do, it's going to support all three of those industry segments.

Q: Do you think it's going to help having served in the Oregon Legislature?

A: Sure. I feel very fortunate to have good relationships with both the governor and with legislators on both sides of the aisle, Republican and Democrats, and also folks in the business community and in the labor community.

It's going to take a broad coalition of people to overcome that challenge.

But sure I think that the bureau's in a good position to lend a hand. I'll do everything I can to bring those diverse groups together, and I'm just very optimistic that it's going to happen.

There's no reason why Oregon shouldn't have the best trained, best skilled work force in the nation, and I think we can accomplish that.

Q: With this story coming out on Labor Day, is there any message you would like to convey about the occasion?

A: There is a Labor Day message, and it cuts both ways, too.

I think society should always remember the value of the workers, and the value that labor unions bring to a society.

But that should always be remembered by respecting the businesses that provide jobs, as well.

Those two things are interdependent, organized labor and strong industry. One does not survive without the other.