



Commissioner Brad Avakian

Bureau of Labor and Industries

Commissioner's Message – March 30, 2011 *A Season of Progress for Oregon's Economy*

Dear Friends,

It's been a long, hard road for Oregon's economy since the national recession began in late 2007. In the wake of the meltdown on Wall Street, too many businesses on Oregon's Main Streets were forced to close their doors, and too many of our workers were pushed onto the unemployment lines. In all, Oregon lost nearly 150,000 jobs in 2008 and 2009 – a devastating blow to the state's economy. Even when we started to see some job growth again in 2010, it was too slow and too halting to give anyone much comfort.

This spring, however, we're starting to see signs of real progress on the road to recovery.

- Real progress in Oregon's employment reports, which are now showing the fastest job growth in 15 years and strong momentum in the construction and manufacturing sectors.
- Real progress in Oregon's workforce development efforts, where BOLI has partnered with the Department of Transportation to prepare more workers for good, living-wage jobs in the highway construction trades.
- Real progress in Oregon's Legislature, where Republicans and Democrats are coming together around several BOLI bills to protect workers' rights and revitalize practical career education for our students.

All of these developments are encouraging, and you can find more detailed updates about each of them below. But first, I want to take a moment to say a few words in particular about our career education bill, which goes to the heart of my belief that the best way to expand economic opportunity tomorrow is to expand educational opportunity today.

Last year, I [wrote](#) to you about how employers were consistently telling me that they couldn't find enough workers with the right job skills. Those conversations were a painful reminder of the costly mistake Oregon made when it stopped investing in the type of vocational training that had once been a staple in our schools. It was a discouraging situation, but as I emphasized then, finding a solution to the problem could present "a real opportunity in our state" – an opportunity to reinvest in one of the most important components of our children's education.

Over the past year, we've developed a plan to seize that opportunity – a plan supported by an abroad coalition of businesses, labor unions, trade associations, educators, and legislators from both parties. Embodied in House Bill 3362, the plan would jumpstart the revitalization of Career and Technical Education in our middle schools and high schools and help prepare our students for living-wage jobs in high-growth industries. As [reported](#) by the *Statesman Journal*, the career

education bill took “center stage” in Salem last week with a favorable hearing before the House Education Committee, and it enjoys the bipartisan support of 59 cosponsors.

Passage of HB 3362 would send an unmistakable message that Oregon stands united in its commitment to expanding opportunity for our students and supporting our businesses by developing a highly skilled workforce. In the months ahead, I’ll keep you posted on the progress of our career education bill in the Legislature, and please let me know if you have additional ideas for how we can continue to strengthen Oregon’s economy, support Oregon’s businesses, and protect Oregon’s workers.

Sincerely,

Brad Avakian

2011 Brings Renewed Job Growth to Oregon

On March 15, the Oregon Employment Department released the most encouraging [jobs report](#) the state has seen in over a decade. Highlights of the report include:

- **Strongest job growth in 15 years.** The Oregon economy created 9,800 jobs in February, the largest monthly gain since 1996. The job growth in February followed a strong gain of 6,700 jobs in January, and the Oregon economy has now created jobs for five straight months.
- **Job growth in both construction and manufacturing.** The Employment Department reported that “construction employment appears to have turned the corner,” having now experienced three consecutive months of seasonally adjusted job gains, and the Department also highlighted that manufacturing employment has risen 2.4% over the past year.
- **The unemployment rate continues to drop.** The unemployment rate, which was as high as 11.6 percent in 2009, continued its steady decline and was down to 10.2 percent in February 2011.

Reporting on the news, [OPB](#) observed that “Oregon’s economy appears to be gathering steam,” and the [Oregonian](#) described the new numbers as evidence that the state is “bouncing back strongly from the recession.”

BOLI Announces Additional Training and Support Services Under Highway Workforce Development Program

Since the last Commissioner’s Message, BOLI has announced three more major agreements under the 2011 BOLI-ODOT Heavy Highway Workforce Development Program. The program is funding critical training and support services that will help current and aspiring construction

workers gain and keep high-skill, living-wage jobs. These services are also helping to knock down barriers traditionally faced by women and minorities who are interested in the highway trades.

The three newly announced agreements – with the Oregon and Southern Idaho Laborers-Employers Training Trust, Portland Community College, and the Academy for Architecture, Construction & Engineering – come on top of previous agreements reached with Cooper Zeitz and Portland Youthbuilders. More details on the services that will be provided under the agreements can be found [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

“Our top priority is expanding job opportunities for Oregonians around the state, and that’s exactly what this workforce development program does. Under the projects we’re funding in partnership with ODOT, early training will be more accessible to women and people of color who are seeking careers in the highway construction industry, and key support will be available to help young apprentices overcome financial barriers to completing their training and qualifying for living-wage jobs.” – *Commissioner Avakian*

House Unanimously Passes BOLI Bill To Protect Workers From Paychecks that Bounce

Short version:

[“Bill would aid workers paid with bad checks”](#) (*Statesman Journal*)

Longer version:

In a resounding victory for Oregon workers, the House passed HB 2039 last week by a vote of 58-0. The bill authorizes BOLI to assess civil penalties against an employer who has paid an employee with a non-sufficient funds (NSF) check.

Under current law, an employee who files a claim with BOLI for unpaid wages cannot recover damages resulting from the numerous NSF bank fees and overdraft charges the employee may have incurred in trying to cash the employer’s deficient check. Instead, the employee is forced to prosecute a separate legal action for those remedies. The most vulnerable and lowest-wage workers often do not have the resources to take private legal action and can be left bearing the costs of the bounced paycheck. HR 2039 solves this problem by empowering BOLI to seek the same civil penalties available in a private lawsuit, with the recovered money payable directly to the wronged employee.

Bipartisan Majority in Oregon Legislature Provides Additional Workers’ Benefits

During the Great Recession of 2007-2009, a record number of Americans found themselves out of work for extended periods of time through no fault of their own. Across the country, [different](#)

[states have taken different approaches](#) in deciding whether to continue helping these workers as they struggle to make ends meet while looking for new jobs to support their families.

In Oregon, most Democrats and Republicans have rejected partisan political arguments about this issue and followed the advice of the nonpartisan economists who [agree](#) that extending unemployment benefits in a recovery helps “drive the economy because the unemployed tend to spend every dollar they get, pumping cash into businesses.” In addition to being good for our economy, it’s also the right thing to do for Oregon’s working families who are fighting to pay their bills and keep food on the table. That’s why we should be so proud that the Oregon Legislature overwhelmingly passed – and [Governor Kitzhaber signed](#) – two bills that extend unemployment benefits for Oregonians as they look for new jobs.

Equal Pay and Intern Protection Bills Receive First Public Hearings in House

The Equal Pay for Equal Work Act of 2011 (HB 2861) and the Civil Rights Protections for Interns and Volunteers Act of 2011 (HB 2862) both received hearings in the House Business and Labor Committee last week. The bills are priorities for BOLI and the Oregon Council on Civil Rights.

HB 2862 would clarify that existing civil rights and workplace protections also apply to interns and volunteers. HB 2861 would fill a hole in Oregon’s current equal pay law, which prohibits wage discrimination based on gender but does not prohibit wage discrimination based on race, color, religion, sexual orientation, national origin, marital status, disability, or age. The [Statesman Journal](#) reported on the equal pay hearing, and quoted the Commissioner’s argument in support of HB 2861:

“By extending the protections of Oregon’s equal-pay law to all classes of citizens who have endured unlawful discrimination, we can take another important step forward in the long march towards equality in the workplace.”

Bipartisan Support for the Career and Technical Education Bill

Commissioner Avakian explained above why he is so passionate about restoring career and technical education to our schools, but he’s not alone. Here are some recent statements from other elected leaders about the issue:

“This bill is bringing Oregonians together across party lines because it will achieve goals we all share. It will equip our students to compete for high-wage jobs in high-growth industries, and it will provide our businesses with the highly skilled workers they need to continue or expand their operations here in Oregon.” – *Representative Sal Esquivel (R-Medford)*

“Investing in Career and Technical Education today will pay big dividends in the future by keeping more homegrown businesses in Oregon, attracting new businesses to the state,

and creating more good jobs for our workers – all of which helps our state’s bottom line. In short, this bill is a win for Oregon’s students, a win for Oregon’s businesses, and a win for Oregon’s economy.” – *Representative Michael Dembrow (D-Portland)*

“This is just one more way to connect business with the government and educational systems and allow students to have other career options.” – *House Republican Leader Kevin Cameron (R-Salem)*

For a complete overview of BOLI’s legislative agenda for 2011 – including the career education bill and other priorities – please see our fact sheet, [BOLI Bills Briefly](#). If you have any questions about the status of particular bills, please contact BOLI Legislative Director Kate Newhall at kate.newhall@state.or.us.