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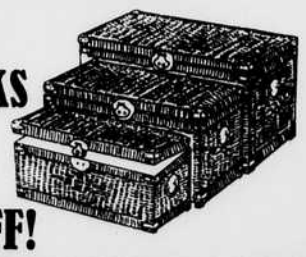
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Sizemore pushes new tax bills

But the Oregon Public Employees Union argues that the tax bills are anti-worker and anti-union

By Kari Thorene
Higher Education Reporter

The Oregon Public Employees Union and the Portland-based Oregon Taxpayers United are preparing early for the 1998 battle over OTU initiatives.

"Our goal for 1998 is to educate people and the members of our union so they know the true nature of these bills," said Sue Bettin, president of the University's local chapter of the OPEU. The bills are essentially anti-worker and anti-union, she said.

Bill Sizemore, president and founder of OTU, said its goals are to empower Oregon taxpayers. "We want to limit the growth of government spending and give taxpayers the highest quality for the lowest price by injecting competition into the equation," he said.

The initiatives are wide-reaching and disparate. They include a freeze on state and local government spending, elimination of government payroll deductions for campaign and political purposes and compulsory opening of government contracts.

The "Measure to Limit Government Spending" would tie increases in spending by state and local governments to increases in inflation and population only and would compel governments to reduce income taxes if there is a projected surplus. The two goals of the bill are to lower state income tax rates and to "discourage governments from finding new ways to extract money from citizens because if politicians can't spend the money, then there will be no motivation for them to find ways to increase revenues," according to an OTU statement.

"The bill imposes tight spending limits, locking in the already inadequate levels of funding for public services," Bettin said.

Without the option to increase funding, money for public services will become increasingly scarce, forcing people to chose between public services because of limited resources, she said.

But Sizemore said the initiative has a safety valve in case of funding emergencies. "Voters have the option to override the limits," he said. "But it probably won't happen. The trend in America is toward less government, lower taxes, more individual responsibility. That precludes an increase in spending."

Bettin said a likely scenario for the impacts of a budget crunch under the initiative is that students would have to "take up the slack" for increasing education costs.

The "Measure to Prohibit Governments from Collecting Political Funds" would eliminate payroll deductions used for political purposes from government employees' paychecks. According to the OTU statement, "This measure will force our opponents to collect their campaign funds the same way we do ours, from individual citizens who are willing to contribute."

Both Sizemore and OPEU officials agree that this is a direct attack on the OPEU's funding mechanism.

"They collect funds used for politics at the taxpayers' expense, and it's an unfair advantage," Sizemore said. "We don't think you can have fair elections if governments collect political funds for one side and not the other."

But Bettin said it's a legitimate form of fund raising. "Payroll deductions are used for everything — insurance payments, car payments, United Way — those can all be deductions." Singling out union dues amounts to content-based discrimination because all other reasons for fund raising would remain legal and legitimate, Bettin said.

Bettin added that joining the union and contributing to the political campaign are voluntary acts, and that OPEU members should be allowed to do whatever they want with their paychecks, whether it's through a payroll deduction or not.

The initiative titled "Measure to Require Giving Voters the Option of Contracting Out Government Services When Private Sector Bidding Would Save More Than 20 Percent Over Public Sector Provider" would open public services to private-sector bidding.

If private companies can prove they will provide a 20 percent savings over the public agency doing the service, the government will have to contract the service out or refer it to the voters if the initiative passes. For example, Sizemore said he believes the state could save substantially if it privatizes prisons.

"We believe that state costs are 30 to 50 percent higher," Sizemore said. "If they aren't, the public sector has nothing to worry about. But with state prisons, we could routinely get bids 28 to 29 percent less if they were private."

But Bettin said the way the private companies would get savings is by reducing wages and benefits, and by proxy the quality of services rendered. "It would turn these jobs into minimum wage, no-benefit jobs. People will care less about the quality of work they're doing," she said.