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PERSPECTIVES

Wage rate cut won't help taxpayers

As long as state contracts can go only to the lowest bidder, wages will fall

AN EMERALD EDITORIAL

To paraphrase those frightening Wal-Mart commercials, wages are falling all over the state. And, much as the success of many national chains is tied to running non-union shops, the decline in wages is linked to a lack of union membership in certain areas of Oregon.

According to a story in The Register-Guard's Sunday edition, a recent change in state labor policy has resulted in lower wage mandates in many areas of the state. At the core of the change is the prevailing wage law, which dictates labor costs on public projects.

The law mandates that contractors pay a certain minimum wage, which is determined from the prevailing wage in a community. Historically, according to the Guard, those wages were determined by data supplied by the U.S. Department of Labor. This year, however, the prevailing wage is being based on a survey conducted by the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries.

Because the survey more closely examined individual communities, wage levels in some areas actually rose, while those in other parts of Oregon fell sharply. Overall, Jack Roberts, Oregon labor commissioner, predicts a savings to the taxpayer of 20 percent.

There is something dishonest about explaining the changes as taxpayer savings. What the changes necessarily mean is lower worker pay, which may be unaccompanied by lower costs for public projects if contractors decide to boost their profit margin.

Of course, many small contrac-

tors who hire a few veteran employees don't want to cut wages. Other aspects of Oregon law make that difficult, however. State law requires that contracts go to the lowest bidder, regardless of other factors. This leaves contractors who don't pay the minimum allowable wage in a difficult position: They either have to pay their employees less, or they don't have contracts and can't pay them at all.

The Register-Guard story also reports that many contractors and workers expect the state rates to have a significant impact on private jobs as well. The only law that regulates those tasks is the minimum wage, but private labor costs tend to mirror the sums charged in public jobs.

Proponents of the change argue that it was unreasonable for state contracts to carry a higher cost of labor than other jobs in an area. They add that reduced labor costs should save money.

The taxpayer-savings claim, as mentioned earlier, is deceptive because it comes at the cost of hurting middle-class workers who are supposed to benefit from tax cuts. The parties that actually come out ahead in the equation are large-business owners, who see a similar decline in their taxes without impact and also benefit from lower wage costs on their private projects.

One significant reason that wages will decline for all projects under the new system is because of the way it penalizes unions. Although the study did consider wages achieved through collective bargaining in towns where the majority of contractors use union labor, most areas have rates determined by non-union shops.

This is unfortunate because it renders union organizations at a competitive disadvantage. Additionally, the survey failed to account for quality of work — many union groups do better jobs because of superior training and benefit packages that attract better workers. The Register-Guard reports that some survey opponents claim the state considered many small, private, non-union jobs that are not comparable with the sort of work the state contracts out.

While re-evaluating the survey results might return wages to a more reasonable level, other changes in state policy would address the core of the problem: As long as contracts are only given to the lowest bidder without other considerations, wages will be held down.

Fixing this would require changing state law to allow administrators to consider other factors in awarding contracts. Possible standards could include reputation, quality of past work, labor relations, union membership and the role of the company in the community.

Clearly, some objective framework for evaluation would need to be used, but there is no reason that framework has to be based on price alone. Higher labor costs might slightly increase taxes, but they dramatically improve the lives of laborers and help push wages up in a community, boosting the economy as a whole.

The real problem with the current system isn't the new survey, but the underlying view that workers should be paid as little

as possible. No one wants their own wages to fall, but they are unwilling to help others preserve their salaries. As long as laborers fail to unite and assist one another, only business owners will benefit from state laws that aid them in paying workers less.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Boycott Gardenburgers

Many of you may not know that there is a national boycott against NORPAC's copyrighted Gardenburger. NORPAC has a horrible record of exploiting migrant labor, farm workers and their rights to organize. Farm workers at NORPAC farms are organizing for increased wages, rights to fair breaks, rights to overtime pay, fair treatment and decent living conditions. NORPAC has continuously refused to give their hardworking farm workers the basic labor rights that humans deserve. Because of these labor and human rights violations, 28 states have formed organizations to boycott NORPAC's Gardenburger.

Knowing these human rights violations, President Frohnmayer and the University have continued to allow NORPAC's Gardenburger in the residence halls. The ASUO Executive is in full support of the Movimiento Estudianti Chicanos de Aztlan (MEChA) in its efforts to remove Gardenburger from this campus.

This institution has a responsibility to make a statement that corporations who abuse labor and human rights domestic and abroad have no place at this University. Students need to continue to tell President Frohnmayer to kick Gardenburger off this campus. At the same time, join us in

boycotting NORPAC's Gardenburger and use alternative vegetarian burgers.

Bill Miner
 ASUO President
Ben Unger
 ASUO Vice President

Vote wisely

Due to the confusion and complications with last year's elections, it has come to my attention that many students do not know that they may vote in the upcoming ASUO elections. Every student may vote in the ASUO elections! The ASUO is your student government, and the leaders you elect this year will make important decisions about the future of your education and tuition dollars.

I would like to urge everyone to look at all of the candidates running for office and make a decision based upon their leadership qualities and qualifications rather than popularity, agendas or good looks.

Not every candidate was given the opportunity to join a slate, so it is important for you to look at each individual and vote for the one who will serve you in the best ways possible. This may sound like common sense, but things can get very confusing when elections come around.

If you have any questions about the

elections, you may contact the ASUO Elections Board at 346-3724. Or, better yet, please attend the candidate debates on April 14 from 7 to 9 p.m. in 100 Willamette.

And, most importantly, please take part in the primary elections on April 15 and 16 and the general elections on April 22 and 23.

It is your choice and your vote, so vote smart. Make educated votes and get to know the candidates.

Autumn De Poe
 Candidate for Athletic Department Finance
 Seat No. 7

Students have power

I am concerned with the level of overall awareness of the students of the University. I know that we read about the issues that surround the students of the University in the Emerald, and some even read the alternative papers that provide some great information. Through these sources we vaguely pay attention to what is occurring on campus and what certain groups are fighting for. Much of the information we have access to assumes some prior knowledge about things such as the sexual conduct code, the infamous incidental fee, Riverfront Research Park expansion and the cost of higher education for all stu-

dents of the University: international, in state, out of state and graduate.

I'm wondering how much the information presented in our school papers makes us aware of how important it is for students to understand what is going on around us. While I have recently learned more about the importance of each of the issues listed above, I have become acutely aware of how much power the students of the University can and do have.

If we band together to create awareness and realize that each event that occurs on this campus affects each person at some level, I believe that progressive education is an automatic result. The ASUO elections are coming up this month, and the candidates are promoting many issues.

I urge the students of the University to pay attention to the information being presented and vote for the group of students whose main goal is to increase student awareness and empower the student voice. Use the ASUO as a catalyst to fight for the right to a fair and just education. Vote student rights; vote Progressive.

Corrie Nichols
 Candidate for Student Senate
 Program Finance Committee
 Seat No. 2