

Workers take on Oregon University System

Representatives from different unions held a rally Thursday to discuss problems facing OUS employees

By Brooke Ross
Oregon Daily Emerald

Workers around the world unite. Several speakers voiced that theme during the United Labor for Workers' Rights Rally, held Thursday in the EMU Amphitheater.

The Service Employees International Union/Oregon Public Employees Union Local 503 sponsored the event, which highlighted the issues in the contract renegotiations currently in progress between the Oregon University System and its classified employees.

Dozens of people gathered at the rally, including representatives from the Human Rights Alliance, the Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation and a number of other groups.

Cheri Smith, a University undergraduate receptionist for the computer and information science department and president of the SEIU/OPEU Local 85 in Eugene, said the OUS has been making drastic proposals that would decrease classified employees' job security. She said they want to increase layoffs, decrease overtime pay and hire temporary workers instead of full-time employees.

"It's a big issue nationwide," she said. "There's labor struggles going on all over Lane County right now, and we're trying to point out where some of the struggles are."

Smith said the OUS employs more than 25,000 classified employees, including workers in food service, accounting and health services. She said those employees are bargaining with the OUS for working



Adam Amato Emerald

Two unidentified supporters, along with a number of others, sit in the EMU Amphitheater Thursday to watch the United Labor for Workers' Rights Rally.

improvements, such as reasonable wages and fully paid health care.

"When you take one of us on, you take us all on," she said.

Bart Lewis, a University accounting clerk and a member of SEIU/OPEU Local 85, said many of these labor struggles are a result of state budget cuts. He said in addition to wages, employees are also bargaining for adequate health insurance because OUS is looking to

decrease its coverage.

"Employers are either denying health coverage or making workers pay a greater percentage," he said.

Kathie Best, president of the SEIU/OPEU Local 503, said wages are also a serious issue. She said there are currently OUS employees who qualify for government assistance because they do not make enough money.

"Unfortunately, there isn't

enough value placed on people who are willing to work hard," she said. "There's more and more need for unions in this country to protect the rights of workers."

State Sen. Tony Corcoran, D-Cottage Grove, a member of the SEIU/OPEU Local 503, also attended the rally to show his support and update the crowd on recent employee victories.

He said the state Legislature recent-

ly signed a health maintenance organization reform bill which will eventually give workers more rights concerning their health-care coverage.

"We signed it finally, after eight years," he said.

Corcoran said classified employees need support because University labor issues affect the entire campus.

"If you're a public employee or student you need to start paying attention," he said.

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