

Feds threaten to sue Washington to block Hanford worker comp

The Associated Press

RICHLAND, Wash. — The federal government is threatening to sue Washington state to block recent legislation that helps workers at a former nuclear weapons production site win compensation claims for illnesses.

The U.S. Department of Justice recently informed Gov. Jay Inslee the law violates the Supremacy Clause of the U.S. Constitution because it “purports to directly regulate” the federal government and discriminates against it and its contractors.

The Seattle Times reports the letter to Inslee warned of legal action if a settlement cannot be reached by Friday.

The letter represents the Trump administration’s displeasure with a state law passed last spring to help Hanford workers who fell sick, the newspaper reported.

Hanford for decades made plutonium for nuclear weapons and thousands of workers are now engaged in the dangerous work of cleaning up the resulting radioactive waste. The site is located near Richland, Washington.

The Department of Energy, which operates Hanford, is a self-insured employer and pays out claims. The state Department of Labor & Industries makes the final determination on any

cases that are appealed by Hanford workers.

Under the new law passed this year, some cancers and other illnesses are assumed to be due to chemical or radiological exposures at Hanford, unless that presumption can be rebutted by clear and convincing evidence.

Representatives for Inslee and state Attorney General Bob Ferguson, both Democrats, said they were willing to discuss the new law with the federal government, but were unwilling to suspend enforcement.

Ferguson told the newspaper he would look forward to defending the law if the

federal government filed a lawsuit.

“Hanford workers deserve to be compensated for the health issues caused by their dangerous work,” Ferguson said.

Hanford Challenge, a nuclear watchdog group, and the United Association of Plumbers and Steamfitters, Local Union 598, both backed passage of the law.

In a letter sent this week to Inslee, their leaders called the law “an appropriate response to address the documented history of inadequate treatment of the hazards associated with the Hanford cleanup.” The letter was signed by Tom Carpen-

ter, Hanford Challenge’s executive director and Randall Walli, business manager of Local Union 598.

The legislation signed into law in March by Inslee was propelled through the Legislature by the concerns of sick Hanford workers frustrated by state denials of their compensation claims.

The legislation drew op-

position from the Washington Self-Insurers Association and the Association of Washington Business, with critics arguing that it was “breathtaking in its scope and inclusivity” and would set a bad precedent, according to a summary of testimony included in a state House of Representatives report.

LIBRARY

Continued from Page 1A university to change the library’s name to include both Walter’s and Cornelia’s historical contributions.

In the years since, the name of the library has remained controversial.

A 2010 letter to the editor in The Observer called for the university to rename the library. In December 2017, the EOU faculty senate passed a resolution to affirm the desire to see the name of the library changed through a deliberative process.

At the November Board of Trustees meeting, EOU President Tom Insko told the board a committee was being formed to look into the possibility of removing the Pierce name from the library.

Tim Seydel, vice president for university advancement at EOU, will be leading the committee. He said the group will be evaluating available material to make a recommendation to Insko on whether changing the name is a viable option.

“We’ll be looking at all the information that has been gathered to date and then the group will decide if there is additional information that needs to be researched or pulled together. Then (we will) provide a recommendation of whether we should retain the name or remove the name,” Seydel said.

Walter Pierce: an ‘honorary klansman’

Walter’s association with the Klan is part of the historical record. In the official State of Oregon archives it states, “Pierce won the governorship ... with the aid of the Ku Klux Klan.”

Other sources say the relationship is less cut and dry. The Oregon History Project, produced by the Oregon Historical Society, states on its website: “Pierce’s relationship to the Klan is unclear; he was probably not a member, but he did court their support.”

Yet, the meeting minutes

from the La Grande KKK meeting, which are available through the Oregon Historical Society, on Jan. 26, 1923, referred to Walter as a member who was in attendance at its November meeting.

“The Honorary Members in Attendance Were Klansman Walter M. Pierce, Governor Elect of La Grande Oregon.”

David A. Horowitz, a longtime cultural history professor at Portland State University and the editor of “Inside the Klavern: The Secret History of a Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s” — an annotated collection of the meeting minutes of the La Grande KKK chapter from 1922 to 1924 — referred to Walter as an honorary klansman. In the book, Horowitz said there is no evidence of Walter ever paying dues or being sworn into the Klan.

Horowitz also wanted to be clear to distinguish the 1920s KKK from the Klan that existed in the 1860s and the 1950s and 1960s.

“Their prejudices were ugly, unseemly, but they’re not the racist knight riders that many associate with the klan,” Horowitz wrote.

The 1920s Klan was more anti-Catholic than anything else, Horowitz said.

He also compared the 1920s Klan’s “casual racism” to that of other contemporary mainstream organizations’ racial attitudes.

While Horowitz wrote that Walter was “really racist” when it came to Asian immigrants, he stated these were common prejudices held by middle-class white men in the 1920s. In Walter’s address as governor to the Oregon Legislature in 1923, he made his feelings clear: “We should enact a law prohibiting the selling or leasing of land in Oregon to the Mongolian and Malay. European and Asiatic civilization can not amalgamate, and we can not and must not submit to the peaceful penetration of the Japanese or other Mongolian races.”

Horowitz said he doesn’t



Observer file photo

Eastern Oregon University is forming a committee to rename Pierce library after its namesake’s questionable political connections.

believe the Pierce name should be removed from the library, noting that forcing all historical figures to live up to the modern cultural values and take out the context of the times the figures lived in is a poor way of understanding history.

Renaming process

EOU isn’t the only Oregon university to consider removing names from buildings based on examinations of the past. In May 2017, the University of Oregon renamed the dormitory Dunn Hall to Unthank Hall because Frederick Dunn, the building’s namesake, was a leader of the KKK. In July 2018, Oregon State University renamed three buildings whose namesakes held racist beliefs.

Seydel said the EOU committee hopes to make a recommendation to the president by the end of spring term. He noted that there will be many elements to consider.

“Some of the interesting things that we have to look at is all the naming components of it, everything from building signage to internal and external markings like on maps,” Seydel said. “Such as materials that are already in the library that are stamped in books ... do

you go through and change all the books? How do you deal with that?”

Seydel said he would like the committee to look into making the name change a public aspect of the library.

“If there is a name change, (I would like there to be) space dedicated within the facility recognizing the name change and stating in a very clear and public manner why the name change took place and documenting that, so we don’t just erase history — we actually acknowledge it,” he said.

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