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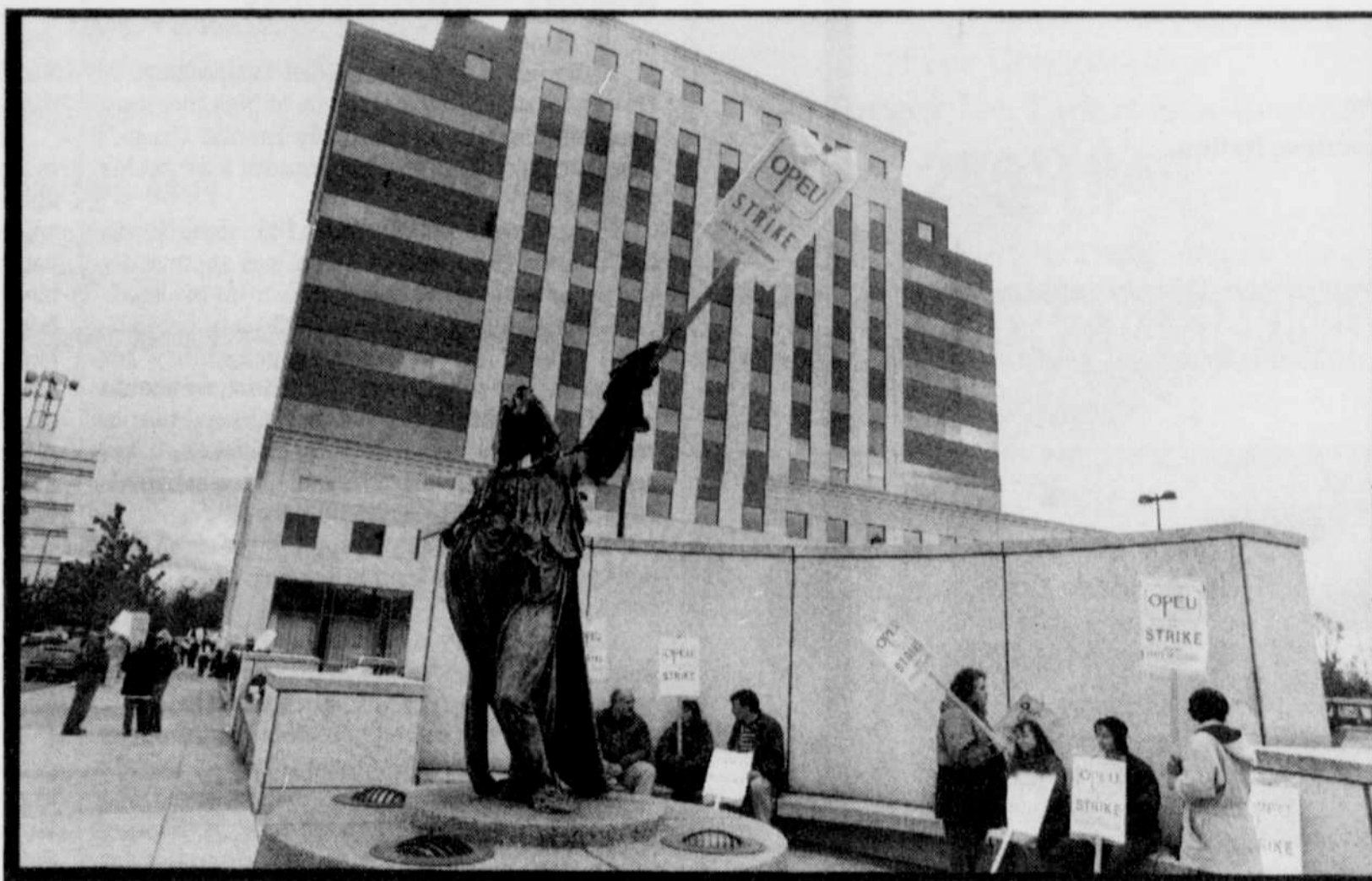


PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

guest editorial

Affirmative action 101

We need to discuss how to improve affirmative action, not how to dismantle it

by Kathleen Herron

Many of us don't understand the history of or the reasons behind affirmative action. Without understanding it, we can't educate anyone about it or defend it. We need to prepare ourselves, since the same groups that refuse to grant basic civil rights to gay men, lesbians and bisexuals are determined to end affirmative action through various state and federal bills or initiatives.

Affirmative action includes all measures necessary to make equal opportunity a reality for currently and historically excluded groups of people in the United States. Attacks against affirmative action assume that equal opportunity for women and people of color is already a reality. It's not.

Begun in 1964, affirmative action efforts are only 30 years old. For most of that 30-year period, affirmative action has been under attack from Republican administrations. For example, during the Reagan administration, the Justice Department sued 50 cities to stop their successful programs.

Discrimination, segregation, prejudice and violence toward women and people of color began with the founding of this country and continue today. Affirmative action exists as a partial remedy to these problems.

Some people resent the assistance provided by these programs, claiming that individuals must now make it on their own merits. The truth is, no one in this country makes it on his or her own. Many of us (white, male, heterosexual, able-

bodied, wealthy) receive privileges we are totally unaware of. Born on third base, we are sure to hit a triple and can't understand the complaints of those without baseball equipment or training. We get all kinds of help. We get educational help from parents with resources. (In 1993, black men made 74 percent of what white men made, and their unemployment rate was twice as high [*The Oregonian*, Feb. 17, 1995].) We rely on the goodwill of those around us—teachers, customers, employers. (A nationwide survey in 1991 showed that 55 percent of non-Hispanic people thought Hispanic people were less intelligent; 56 percent thought they were more lazy [National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago].) We rely on fair business practices. (In 1993 a Chicago study showed that black couples applying for bank loans with the same financial assets as white couples were denied more often.)

We need to broaden our discussion of affirmative action to address our joint responsibility for solving these complex long-range problems. Since affirmative action currently benefits over 50 percent of our citizens (all women, all people of color), we should be discussing how to improve it, not how to dismantle it.

Kathleen Herron is an adjunct professor for the Northwestern School of Law at Lewis & Clark College and a consultant for Tools for Diversity.

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