

Union drive under way at Providence Health Systems

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

Service Employees International Union (SEIU) hopes to unionize 5,000 workers at Providence Health System in Oregon — starting with the 3,500 at Providence St. Vincent and Providence Portland hospitals, where registered nurses belong to the Oregon Nurses Association. But with Providence rejecting SEIU's call for "neutrality," it's likely to be a protracted campaign.

Portland-based SEIU Local 49 has financial backing from its international union, which is pushing to unionize the health care industry. Local 49 represents workers at Kaiser Permanente and two sites in the Legacy Health System, but never until recently was able to gain momentum at Providence.

Maeve Carroll, a pro-union worker employed as an emergency room registrar at Providence St. Vincent, said workers are interested in unionizing because of concerns about understaffing, inadequate employee health insurance and basic respect from management.

"We know our jobs well, and we could contribute to better patient care by having a chance to be a part of the decision-making," Carroll said.

As the union campaign got under way last year, Local 49's headquarters became a dense warren of organizers coming and going, teaming up with rank-and-file members to visit the homes of workers. Several hundred workers at St. Vincent and Providence Portland have signed on as supporters of the campaign, but management is also prepared to wage an anti-union



Nurses, neighbors and religious leaders join Providence employees Oct. 5, 2005 in a delegation to ask Providence Health Systems Oregon CEO Russ Danielson to sign a "fair elections" pledge. "No thanks," is the answer they've had so far.

campaign, and that has caused union leaders to plot carefully their next move.

If they request a government-supervised election, that would commit them to a fixed timeline and campaign ground rules that give too many advantages to the employer, union leaders say. Instead, they've tried to get Providence management to sign a neutrality pledge that would commit Providence to:

- Allow employees to meet in non-patient areas and discuss openly whether to unionize;

- Refrain from negative campaigning and misleading communication;
- Not require workers to attend anti-union meetings with supervisors;
- Not spend health system resources on consultants specializing in "union avoidance"; and
- Avoid unnecessary delays or legal challenges to union certification.

Providence, which energetically fought union campaigns in Yakima, Wash., and Burbank, Calif., has so far declined to sign the neutrality pledge.

SEIU reached out for community support, particularly among religious leaders.

Though it might not act like one, Providence Health Systems is a tax-ex-

empt non-profit, founded and owned by the Sisters of Providence, a Catholic order of nuns. Providence's logo is a cross. According to its mission statement, Providence "continues the healing ministry of Jesus in the world of today, with special concern for those who are poor and vulnerable."

There's no record that Jesus of Nazareth charged extra to heal the poor (or that he charged anything at all.) But Providence — a \$4-billion-a-year four-state health care network with \$238 million net "profit" in 2004 — was charging uninsured (usually poorer) patients at a higher rate than insured patients — for the same procedures ... until a class action lawsuit forced it to settle out of

court last year.

And notwithstanding scriptures about camels passing through eyes of needles, Providence makes sure its CEOs are very rich: In 2004, then-CEO Hank Walker received \$6.6 million in compensation — the exact average pay received by CEOs at Fortune 500 corporations the year before.

What's a tax-exempt non-profit with a public mission of charity care doing paying lavish Wall Street-style salaries? The Internal Revenue Service wondered that, and launched an inquiry.

Back to Local 49: In October, the union turned in a letter of support signed by almost three dozen clerics, including a dozen Catholic priests and three Catholic nuns, 15 Protestant clerics from at least five denominations, and three rabbis.

"We ask you to honor and respect the freedom of employees to decide for themselves whether to form a union," the letter read.

Providence Vice President Russ Danielson wrote back: "We believe in and openly acknowledge the Catholic social teachings, which affirm that workers have the right to organize or not."

But, Danielson made it clear, workers need to make an "informed" choice. And management would be sure to inform workers about the "risks" of unionizing, "the facts about unions," "the costs of union membership," and so on.

"This is a very anti-union employer," said Local 49 President Alice Dale.

Dale said so far, Providence management in Oregon has run a low-key campaign. But if the union drive gathers steam, management push-back is likely to increase, judging by the examples in Washington and California.

Local Motion

February 2006

Union election activity in Oregon and SW Washington, according to the National Labor Relations Board and the Oregon Employment Relations Board

Elections held

Company	Date	Union	Location	Results:	
				Union	No Union
Sidwell Air Freight (decertification)	2/24	Teamsters Local 962	Central Point	6	9

Elections requested

Company	Location
Union	# of employees
Umpqua Community College	Roseburg
Oregon Education Association	130
May Trucking Company (decertification)	Salem
Teamsters Local 670	31
Air Methods Corporation	Bend
IAM-Woodworkers District Lodge 1	5

New Construction Alliance pushes back launch date

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI) — The launch of the New Construction Alliance by the Laborers Union and Operating Engineers has been pushed back to mid-April.

General presidents from the two unions announced in February that they were disaffiliating from the AFL-CIO Building and Construction Trades Department and joining the Carpenters,

Teamsters, Bricklayers and Iron Workers in the new organization. The Bricklayers and Iron Workers have not said whether they will secede from AFL-CIO Building and Construction Trades Department.

Officials from the Laborers Union and Operating Engineers told Press Associates Inc. that they want to finalize details of the new alliance and hire staff

before they officially open.

Operating Engineers President Vincent Giblin and Laborers President Terry O'Sullivan said in February when announcing the National Construction Alliance that local unions "will selectively remain" affiliated with state and local building trades councils.

O'Sullivan also said the alliance plans to create its own local structure. He said he has been in contact with about 25 unionized contractor associations that have welcomed the creation of the organization.

...City unions reach deal

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surance will vary depending on the coverage (single, married or family).

Over the next four years, the DCTU and the city also will work together to implement a wellness program, with a goal of cutting insurance claims by 3 to 5 percent. And labor and management will lobby state and federal governments for solutions to rising health care costs.

James Hester, staff representative for Local 189 and the chief negotiator for the DCTU, says the agreement on health care coverage was a key to the deal.

"The DCTU believes the tentative agreement reflects the unions' commitment to secure quality health care for its membership," he said. "In addition, the unions believe this is a great example of working with the city as opposed to armoring up for battle at the bargaining table."

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