

Custodial Board rejects PPS' proposed hiring plan

At its Dec. 15 meeting, the Custodial Civil Service Board (CCSB) rejected a Portland Public Schools (PPS) proposal to give special treatment to Portland Habilitation Center (PHC) janitors who are applying for permanent positions with the school district.

PPS is returning to an in-house custodial staff because of an Oregon Supreme Court ruling that the district's 2002 decision to contract out custodial work to PHC to was illegal under the Custodial Civil Service Law.

That law requires that PPS hire from a pool of applicants created by the CCSB, which is supposed to administer a competitive examination open to all. PPS wanted to allow an ungraded cleaning class offered by PHC management to substitute for the graded examination for applicants from PHC. The PHC class was not open to the public at large, unlike the exam, which tests basic math and English reading ability.

The district's proposal was opposed by returning custodians, who belong to Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 503, and by others who took the test when it was last given. Several hundred applicants took the test in August 2006, but the hiring process stopped while the CCSB considered the district's proposal for several months.

PHC, and SEIU Local 49, the union that represents its employees, argued that using only the test would discriminate against applicants on the basis of national origin, since some PHC applicants have limited ability to speak English, and the test was in English.

Others at the Custodial Civil Service Board meeting argued that it was perfectly valid to test English ability, as English is needed on the job. Wayne

Curtin, a returned custodian, said he'd seen how language difficulties with some PHC immigrant workers have prevented them from understanding and carrying out instructions.

And one PHC employee told the Custodial Civil Service Board not to let the class substitute for the test.

"I took the PHC training course, and I didn't think very highly of it," said Robert Baker, a former Freightliner machinist.

After several hours of testimony, the three-member Custodial Civil Service Board unanimously rejected the PPS proposal because of the 11th-hour revelation that PHC offered the class only to its disabled employees. PHC is a non-profit that gets preference for government contracts under a law meant to employ individuals with disabilities who need a sheltered work environment. Custodial Civil Service Board members felt that since some of the limited-English janitors might not have taken the class, the class wouldn't remedy the concern expressed by the district about discrimination.

Custodial Civil Service Board did however agree to another PPS request — to reduce the weight of the exam in the hiring process. The exam was to have counted for 60 percent and now will count for 20 percent. Work experience, employer reviews and answers to interview questions will count for the other 80 percent.

"That's not fair," said applicant Bruce Koslowski, who complained that the district reduced the weight of the exam after he took it.

Oral interviews began in late December. The district hasn't said when it will complete the transition to in-house staff, except that it plans to be finished by September 2007.

Think Again • By Tim Nesbitt



Final Column

My 'think again list' for 2007

I am excited about joining Governor Ted Kulongoski's staff, but I am sad to have to give up this column. Still, I can't be a member of the governor's leadership team and an independent commentator on Oregon politics at the same time.

So it's time to move on. But, before I do, I want to share my current thoughts on what I had hoped to explore in future columns.

Call this my "think again list" for 2007.

Whither our union movement?

When I began this column almost three years ago, we were fighting to unseat the most anti-union president of our lifetimes, working to re-energize our organizing efforts and trying to revitalize our union movement at the same time. Now, just as we have helped to deliver a stunning repudiation of that president and are watching him lose his grip on power, we are still searching for new ways to reach the growing numbers of workers without unions and to survive as a united movement.

Those of us who have worked in unions for the past several decades can't say we've been part of a growing movement. But we know we've made a tremendous difference in the lives of our members and in the contest of political power for working families. This country would be in far worse shape today if we hadn't fought the good fights during those decades.

But will we be able to move from defense to offense before we leave the playing field? Can we in our lifetimes reorganize the resources of our movement to grow again and regain the kind of broad-based political power that labor commanded a half century ago?

The chicken-and-egg debate that preceded the split in the AFL-CIO in 2005 continues. Must we build political power to change our labor laws and enable us to organize more workers? Or, should we concentrate on organizing more workers, using new strategies to do so, before we try to reach critical mass in the political arena?

Obviously, we need to do both. But I also think we need a third leg if we hope to move forward. We need to focus on the role of government,

not just as referee on the economic playing field, but as a player in its own right with the power to make life better for working people that will always be far greater than that of our union movement.

For an excellent analysis of our movement's sometimes schizophrenic view of government, I recommend Nelson Lichtenstein's "State of the Union, A Century of American Labor" (2002, Princeton University Press). Despite all the angst about a global economy that is rapidly escaping the reach of national governments, Lichtenstein's analysis reminds us that our fate as working people is inexorably linked to our power as citizens and the purpose of our public institutions.

Shared responsibility as a new model for progressive government. I learned a lot from working with the Higher Ed board on a new model for college aid.

Research shows that students who work part-time during the school year do better in college than those who don't work at all. And voters in focus groups tell us that they would be far more willing to help students who work or at least pay something for their education than those who don't. These insights gave birth to the new shared responsibility model we're promoting as a way to make college affordable for all Oregonians.

The shared responsibility approach offers something to those who contribute something themselves. It's based on the concept of matching effort, rather than subsidizing need.

If government would match the efforts of more middle class families, whether for college or health care, social programs would be seen in a different light than those of the proverbial welfare state.

In Oregon, publicly-funded college aid and health care for the able-bodied reach only the poorest of the poor. But the financing needed to expand such programs and provide at least modest amounts of help for middle class families is not beyond our reach. For example, long-overdue adjustments in the state's corporate minimum and tobacco taxes could pay for a truly affordable higher education system and health

care for all children in families with incomes up to \$60,000 or even \$80,000 a year.

When government uses its resources to support more working families, working families will become more supportive of their government.

What will be the jobs of the future? I continue to tell my daughter that she made the right choice when she decided to pursue a nursing degree. There will be great demand for nursing jobs in the years ahead, both because of the aging of the baby boomers and their exodus from the healthcare workforce.

But I can't assure her that these jobs which we're handing off to the next generation will continue to be good-paying jobs, if we don't have a union movement and a progressive government to defend them.

The debates today about the jobs of the future range from the faith-based (that education is the ticket to all better jobs) to the cynical (that we're doomed to lose more good jobs than we'll gain as corporations scour the globe for cheaper labor). Neither view is persuasive to me.

I continue to think that the formal model of higher education is a social good that we should continue to make more accessible to everyone with the interest and ability to pursue it. But, I sense that its utility in the job market has been greatly exaggerated. Also, I think that the turnover of jobs from the baby boom generation and the dynamism of technological innovation will prove the cynics wrong about opportunities in the workforce of the future.

My conclusion: The future can be much brighter for our children if we make the right choices. As working people and trade unionists, we need to reorganize our movement to defend the jobs of the future. As citizens, we need to undertake a massive public investment in alternative energy development and demand a reorganization of government to better support the efforts of working families.

And I'd like us to have a little more confidence — that we can think and rethink our way through these changing times and both figure things out and straighten them out before we leave the playing field.



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Happy New Year!