

# Maintenance crew at Portland Schools votes to strike

**Members of the 14-union DCU have been working without a new contract since Dec. 31, 2005**

A bargaining group of 119 skilled trades workers at Portland Public Schools (PPS) may be on the verge of a strike after years of contract stonewalling by the district.

At an April 26 meeting attended by nearly the entire unit, members of the District Council of Unions (DCU) rejected the district's final contract proposal by a margin of 80 percent, and by a similar margin gave the bargaining committee the power to call a strike. No further bargaining sessions are scheduled.

"We're done," said Jerry Moss, Plumbers and Fitters Local 290 representative and spokesman for the DCU.

With the two sides at impasse, the district may move to impose its contract offer without the consent of union members. Members have been working

under the terms of their previous contract since it expired Jan. 1, 2006. That contract — signed just weeks before its term ended — contained no wage increases. Nor are there any raises in the district's current offer, which also would reduce the number of paid holidays from 11 to nine, increase out-of-pocket health care costs for employees, and do away with employer-paid retiree health coverage by 2013.

Moss said the district's approach to bargaining was to present its offer, and never change its position in a year of meetings.

"If this is the offer you're gonna make from day one and you never budge," Moss said, "how do you call that bargaining?" The DCU plans to file an unfair labor practice charge with the Oregon Employment Relations Board.

The DCU includes Teamsters, Machinists and 12 building trades unions. A skilled force that once numbered 400 to 500 members, it's now a skeleton crew too stretched putting out fires to do preventive maintenance, said

Scott Lucy, a business rep for Machinists District Lodge 24. Meanwhile, two unions that used to belong to the DCU have left to go it alone.

Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757, which represents about 85 school bus drivers, decided earlier this year to bargain separately. School bus operations have a separate state funding source, explained Local 757 President Jon Hunt, and bus drivers aren't year-round employees like most DCU members. But Hunt says so far, bargaining solo hasn't produced any different result. PPS's proposal and bargaining posture are identical, down to the amount they're willing to contribute to health benefits — \$779 a month, \$15 more than its current cap.

The other union to leave the DCU is a section the Portland Federation of Teachers and Classified Employees Local 111 (campus monitors, occupational and physical therapists and community agents). Those employees were transferred into the major PFTCE contract, which expires on June 30. Bargaining with the district began April 19.

Union leaders had hoped the district's decision at the beginning of the year to hire Tom Gunn — a former union-side negotiator — meant it was ready to soften its stance. But Moss and Hunt say they've found Gunn to be a kinder, gentler conduit for the same "take it or leave it" message.

Gunn, for his part, faulted the DCU for rejecting an offer of mediation, and said it's not true that the district's final offer was no different than its initial proposal.

Moss said he's never been this frustrated with a negotiation, and in 10 years of bargaining contracts for Plumbers and Fitters Local 290, never before called for strike authorization.

For DCU members, the sticking points are the wage freeze and elimination of retiree health coverage.

Almost one in five DCU members are eligible for retirement as of this year. Most PPS building trades members retire at 60, Moss said, and the district keeps retirees on the district's plan for five years, so in effect, the district covers them until they become eligible for Medicare.

As for wages, the three-fifths of DCU members who belong to building trades unions make as much as \$5 an hour less than their counterparts in construction, though unlike the construction side, they do enjoy a regular year-round schedule and participation in the PERS retirement system. Team-

ster drivers, meanwhile, make \$19.94 an hour, and Machinist bus mechanics top out at \$23.53.

Two months after district superintendent Vicki Phillips presented a "good news" budget with funding for new programs, how can PPS be asking maintenance workers to go two more years with no raise?

"They're not really asking," said Lucy. "They're telling us. And we're telling them back."

Every time DCU leaders have reached out to the School Board, Moss said they're told to deal directly with the negotiators. Moss doesn't think it's Gunn who's calling the shots.

"I think there's a group of people, at upper administrative levels, that is convinced they can push [the DCU] wherever they want."

After impasse, the law requires a 30-day cooling-off period, after which the bargaining team can call a strike.

## Nurse staffing forum set May 31 at PCC Cascade Campus

A community forum on safe registered nurse staffing will be held Thursday, May 31, at 7 p.m. at the Portland Community College Cascade Campus, 705 N. Killingsworth St., Portland.

The forum is co-sponsored by Jobs with Justice Workers' Rights Board, the Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Care Professionals Local 5017, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, and the United Nurses of Legacy.

Registered nurses from the Legacy Health System will share their experiences on understaffing at the chain of Legacy hospitals in the Portland metropolitan area.

Some 2,000 nurses have been trying to form a union at Legacy for nearly two years.

The community forum also will include a Workers' Rights Board hearing. This is a public forum where workers can bring complaints against employers for violating their human and legal rights in the workplace. The Board is drawn from a broad spectrum of community leaders and can intervene with employers and the public to help resolve situations that threaten workers' rights.

Everyone is invited to attend.

For more information, call Matthew Rae at 503-358-3016.

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