

Let me say this about that

...Matt Meehan

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cently, the ILWU modernized its name to the gender-neutral International Longshore and Warehouse Union.

IN 1944 with World War II raging, Meehan shipped out on a Merchant Marine freighter as a member of the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union so he could get to the Hawaiian Islands in wartime. After he got there, Meehan laid the groundwork for the ILWU to successfully organize workers in the Hawaiian dock, sugar and pineapple industries.

MEEHAN RESIGNED as the ILWU's secretary-treasurer in 1948 and became a Portland-based international representative for the union. One of his office secretaries in Portland was Julia Ruuttila, an activist in labor and leftist causes who covered Oregon for the ILWU's Dispatcher newspaper. Meehan retired from the union in 1957 to become arbitrator of disputes between the ILWU and the Pacific Maritime Association. He retired from that job in 1963 but continued to serve as a relief arbitrator until 1971.

Meehan died on Feb. 24, 1977 at the age of 80. He was living alone in a log cabin home in the community of Wemme near Mount Hood. His wife Juanita had lived there with him until her death in 1973. Meehan's well-attended funeral was held on Feb. 28 at St. Mary's Catholic Cathedral in Northwest Portland. More than 40 active and retired union members served as pallbearers and honorary pallbearers. He was buried at Mt. Calvary Cemetery.

MOURNERS at Meehan's funeral included Harry Bridges, who was in his final months as union president. Bridges told the crowd: "Matt and I went through a lot together in the early days. We were two union organizers, two working stiffs. Neither of us had much education. We never had any disagreements on what we were fighting to advance, the interests of the class to which we belonged; but sometimes we had disagreements on the best way to do it."

Recalling that there were many critics in business circles when Meehan went to organize workers in Hawaii, Bridges added, "It's hard to find one today who will not admit that the movement which we represent has been of great benefit to all people in Hawaii, the same as is true of the rest of the nation."

AT THE Multnomah County Labor Council meeting in the Portland Labor Center on the night of Feb. 28, 1977, delegates stood for a moment of silence in memory of Meehan.

Matt Meehan's name is herewith placed on the Labor Honor Roll, which was started by the NW Labor Press to posthumously salute unionists of years past for their contributions to the labor movement. The Labor Hall of Fame gives recognition to retired union members while they are still living. It is sponsored by the NW Oregon Labor Retirees Council.



MATT MEEHAN

★★★

FEDERAL LEGISLATION to provide a \$1,000 monthly pension to U.S. Merchant Marine veterans of World War II passed by a wide margin in the U.S. House of Representatives. The progress report on House Resolution 23 came from Christ Vokos, president of the Columbia-Willamette League of U.S. Merchant Marine Veterans of World War II, and William Fast, a League member. Vokos is a retired secretary-treasurer of Portland Bakers Local 364, and Fast is a retired port agent for the Marine Engineers Beneficial Association and a former president of the Multnomah County Labor Council. The legislation now awaits action by the U.S. Senate of Senate Bill 961, which is the number of the bill in the upper chamber.

...Disabled worker programs act as a wedge for privatization

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probably not disabled, at least within the meaning of the law. Many had been working at private-sector jobs when they were hired by PHC — jobs they'd gotten in a competitive labor market without any accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Several had been laid off because of factory closure and had "depression" listed as their disability. Ten had been hired by PHC initially as non-disabled, and were later reclassified as disabled.

In the Portland Public Schools case, it wasn't that PHC had hundreds of disabled clients that it needed to find a contract for. Rather, PHC had a contract that it needed to find hundreds of disabled clients for. The PPS contract increased PHC employment by over 300, to 1,100.

"Were you in special education when you went to school?" PHC recruitment materials asked potential hires. "Do you experience long-term depression, have an anxiety disorder, or take a prescription drug to help you cope with life's struggles?" "With documentation you may be eligible for PHC's employment and training."

Mary Botkin, longtime lobbyist for American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Oregon Council 75, doesn't think that's what state lawmakers had in mind when they passed the Products of Disabled Individuals Law.

"I am sympathetic to legitimate programs that provide work for long-term disabled individuals who need assistance. I think the definition of what is considered a disability needs to be revisited," Botkin said.

Earlier this year, Botkin joined forces with her longtime colleague Mari Anne Gest, a contract lobbyist working for the Oregon School Employees Association, which has a history of opposing efforts to outsource public worker jobs.

In 2004, PHC's experience at Portland Public Schools earned it "runner-up" status in "Outsourcing Journal's" annual Outsourcing Excellence Awards.

"We're seeing the writing on the wall," Gest said. "They're putting union workers and family-waged jobs out of business," Gest said, "and they're certainly not paying family-wage jobs to the disabled."

Botkin and Gest found an unlikely ally in the National Federation of Independent Business, a conservative small-business group that is normally on the opposite side of organized labor.

NFIB's one-time state board member Jerry Egger has made reforming the QRF program a long-time personal crusade. Egger, who owns the Salem mailing services company Mid-Valley Presort, says his company

isn't able to compete for any state contracts because he's pre-empted by a QRF competitor that gets no-bid contracts.

But Eggers says what burns him up more than the lost business is his conviction that a law intended to help the truly disabled is being abused. Egger said his competitors have disabled workers operating \$60,000 inserter machines and \$700,000 mail sorting machines.

"At what point do you classify someone as not being able to compete when they're on a riding lawnmower riding around school grounds?" Egger asks.

At the Eugene airport, a QRF got a contract to provide security, displacing a security firm that employed former police officers.

At Powder River Correctional Facility, a QRF used inmates with substance abuse problems to refill printer ink cartridges for state agencies, resulting in job loss for a small nonunion business in Baker City.

Botkin, Gest, and Egger found their champion in Witt, the Clatskanie House rep. Witt, former secretary-treasurer of the Oregon AFL-CIO, introduced two bills meant to rein in QRFs. One would tighten up the definition of disabled. The other would create an independent board to oversee the QRF industry. As many as 45 non-profits are officially recognized as QRFs.

"When you have \$50 million worth of non-compete contracts that are awarding the public's money," Witt said, "it begs for both sunshine and public accountability."

At an April 6 hearing on the bills, Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain said the state labor federation supports the intent of the law.

"But as the law is being carried out now, family-wage jobs are often lost to individuals recruited by QRFs who are paid a lower wage with less benefits, and who are able to compete in the workplace," Chamberlain said.

QRFs also has defenders, Witt discovered. Former state representative Gary Hansen, now a lobbyist for PHC, testified against the bills.

[Hansen is a member of Plumbers and Fitters Local 290 with longtime ties to labor.] Also testifying were freshman State Rep. Sara Gelsler, the mother of a disabled child, and Service Employees (SEIU) Local 49 political director Felisa Hagin. Local 49 represents PHC workers, and union officials there describe PHC as a good union employer, paying wages above the area janitorial agreement. [About 35 PHC groundskeepers are also union, members of Laborers Local 483.]

The Oregon Rehabilitation Association, the QRF industry group, brought 150 disabled workers to testify and rally outside the Capitol.

There's nothing broken, argued

QRF defenders, so why try to fix it? Several state employees in the Department of Administrative Services provide effective oversight of the QRF program. The disabled have few enough options as it is.

Witt was able to get a watered down version of his commission bill passed out of his own committee. But that was the end of it. It went to the Joint Ways and Means Committee, and there it died without a hearing.

"I put my heart and soul into this issue," says Gest, who won't be returning next session as an OSEA lobbyist. "It was almost like a fight with corporate America, but they're non-profits."

The class-action lawsuit against PHC was dismissed by Multnomah County Circuit Court Judge Edward Jones in April 2005 before a jury got to hear it. Jones sided with PHC, which had argued that "the union — not PHC — was the sole cause of plaintiffs' lost jobs." Whether or not PHC knowingly misrepresented itself in its bid to Portland Public Schools didn't matter, Jones ruled. Before the custodians were fired by the district, their union (a different local of SEIU than the one representing PHC employees) had a chance to match PHC's bid by agreeing to a \$5 million compensation cut. Union leaders thought the district would compromise. "That error in judgment cost the plaintiffs their jobs," Jones wrote.

Williamson and his clients appealed the dismissal to the Oregon Court of Appeals, which heard the case last October, but hasn't decided yet whether the case can go forward.

Meanwhile, in a separate lawsuit, the Oregon Supreme Court ruled in October 2005 that it was illegal for Portland Public Schools to fire the custodians. The district offered them recall, and about 140 accepted. That meant the district had to hire 175 more using its normal civil service procedures. In making the hires, the district considered employment history, an in-person interview, a physical exam showing ability to do the job, and a graded exam testing reading and math. Three-fourths of the 175 custodians the district hired through that *competitive* process had already been cleaning the schools — as employees of PHC.

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