

Eugene/Springfield grocery workers ratify new pacts

EUGENE — Following more than 12 months of bargaining, grocery clerks, meatcutters and central checkout employees finally have new contract with area grocers in Eugene-Springfield.

About 1,100 workers — members of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555 — ratified new four-year contracts Jan. 17 by margins of 90 to 100 percent. The contracts run retroactive to when they expired in February 2007. The union workers are employed at Safeway stores, Supervalu (which now owns Albertsons), and Kroger (parent company of Fred Meyer).

Some of the key provisions in the deal include hard-money wage increases (not bonuses in lieu of wages, as employers initially tried to get). Wages will increase \$1.30 an hour over the life of the agreement, retroactive to February 2007. There will be no health reimbursement accounts (which would have resulted in large increases in deductibles), and employees may volunteer to work Christmas Day, but can't be scheduled to work.

Union officials said grocers came to the table with more than 40 takeaway items.

"This (settlement) happened not because the

employers felt generous, but because our Bargaining Committee was firm in what they wanted, and the community and membership in the Eugene/Springfield area stood strong," said Local 555 Secretary-Treasurer Jeff McDonald.

UFCW knew going in that negotiations would be difficult, so they began preparing a year in advance of the expiration date. Meetings were held monthly to inform members on important bargaining issues, such as how pensions work, how the health and welfare trust operates, and the importance of language in the contract.

"These meetings gave the membership the knowledge and ability to understand and talk with the management negotiators," McDonald said. It also didn't go unnoticed that during negotiations members held several community rallies to show their solidarity. They also voted to authorize a strike by an overwhelming margin.

UFCW now turns its attention to bargaining grocery, meat and central checkout contracts at Safeway, Albertsons and Fred Meyer stores in Vancouver, Wash., Salem, Corvallis, Medford, Roseburg, Coos Bay and Brookings.

Contracts in The Dalles and Hood River expire May 31. Contracts expire in Portland, Bend, and Newport July 26.



Members of UFCW Local 555 vote on new grocery contracts Jan. 17 at the Lane Events Center (Fairgrounds Auditorium) in Eugene. Contracts for grocery clerks, meatcutters and central checkout employees were ratified by wide margins.

Washington labor turns attention to Olympia

OLYMPIA — Washington's labor movement will be paying close attention to Olympia in the next two months, and pushing for passage of a handful of bills that would expand worker rights.

The State Legislature meets annually in Washington, with shorter, 60-day sessions in even-numbered years.

The Washington State Labor Council, the statewide AFL-CIO body, identified several bills as priorities in the Legislature's 2008 session, which began Jan. 14:

•**Expanding the collective bargaining rights of graduate teaching and research assistants.** Grad students working at the University of Washington won the right to unionize in 2002, and today about 4,700 belong to United Auto Workers Local 4121. Now a bill would extend union rights to about 1,700 graduate assistants at Washington State University, which has campuses in Pullman and Vancouver.

•**Restoring unemployment insurance benefits to workers locked out by their employers during labor disputes in multi-employer bargaining units.** A lockout is the employer equivalent of a strike. The grocery industry is an example of where this would make a difference. The United Food and Commercial Workers Union negotiates area-wide contracts with an employer association. In some cases, if the union can't get an acceptable contract, workers may strike just one employer; employers, in solidarity, then might lock out workers at another employer to starve the union back to the table. If employers know the locked out workers will get unemployment insurance, they'll be much less likely to use that tactic.

•**Giving whistleblower protection to state workers.** This is the top priority of the Washington State Labor Council's biggest affiliate — the 40,000-member

Washington Federation of State Employees. WFSE, part of AFSCME, has more than doubled in the last five years since the passage of a law that gave state workers the right to bargain a union contract.

•**Granting benefits while a worker's compensation case is being appealed.** Right now, says WSLC President Rick Bender, workers whose claims are denied don't get benefits while they appeal the rejection, and many who have been wrongly denied

benefits are forced by economic hardship to settle their cases.

WSLC is also backing Gov. Chris Gregoire's "Climate Action and Green Jobs" bill. The bill would direct the State Department of Ecology to design a regional carbon "cap and trade" proposal; require annual emissions reporting by all significant generators of greenhouse gases; and create new "green collar jobs" programs to provide training and apprenticeship opportunities.

And labor is supporting several

health care reform proposals. One would create a work group to design a comprehensive health insurance program for Washingtonians. Another would require insurance companies to justify any rate hikes to the state insurance commissioner.

"The good news is we won't be playing much defense," Bender said. Democrats have the governor's office and a substantial majority in the Legislature, including 34 of the 49 state senators, and 66 of the 98 state representatives.

ATU #757 calls off ambulance strike in Josephine County

GRANTS PASS — Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757 has called off an unfair labor practice strike at American Medical Response (AMR) in Josephine County.

Paramedics and EMTs gave notice to strike Jan. 17 after the company refused to provide financial documents to support a claim that it was losing money in Josephine County that required deep financial cuts from its 33 bargaining unit employees.

A week after receiving the strike notice, AMR changed its position on the documents, and the union received some of them.

"We have sent those documents to our CPA for analysis," said ATU Local 757 President Jon Hunt. "These documents were the key reason for our strike. Now that AMR is providing the documents, we believe the need for the strike is over."

A federal mediator called the parties back into negotiations Jan. 17 that lasted for 12 hours. The parties are scheduled to meet again with the mediator on Feb. 11.

Supreme Court rejects case by Enron investors, union workers

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI) — Unions and advocates for workers and shareholders who have lost billions of dollars to corporate fraud over the last several years were disappointed by the U.S. Supreme Court's Jan. 22 ruling in a case involving Enron.

In a ruling without comment, the justices rejected a case by Enron investors — led by the University of California — who said the banks that colluded with Enron on the shady deals that led to its collapse should be open to lawsuits, too.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans turned that down. Last week the High Court did, too.

Unions and worker pension funds were among the investors who joined the university in arguing that the banks and other colluders in such cases should be legally liable for the losses, too.

Instead, the justices said only the

company involved — Enron in this case — can be taken to trial by anyone who charges their money was fraudulently lost. The court's ruling disappointed the AFL-CIO. The federation's Office of Investment has actively supported shareholders — including union pension funds — challenging not just the mismanaged companies but also the bankers.

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney even connected the court's ruling to the Bush Administration, saying it reflects the court's direction since it declared Bush won the 2000 presidential election.

"For the last five years, lower courts have been considering whether the powerful, politically connected financial institutions at the center of the Enron fraud will have to answer to investors for what they did. Now we have the final answer

from the Supreme Court: They will not. "The Enron financial fraud cost America's working families tens of billions of dollars in lost retirement assets," Sweeney continued. "For thousands of Enron employees, whose 401(k) plans were locked into Enron stock, the losses were personally catastrophic."

That included unionized employees at Portland General Electric in Portland, represented by Electrical Workers Local 125.

"At the center of the fraud were deals Enron did with major financial institutions, whose clear purpose was to hide the true state of Enron's finances," Sweeney said. "...The decision not to hear a case that corporate big shots do not want heard fits very nicely with the overall direction of our legal system since Bush v. Gore."