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# OSEA joins American Federation of Teachers

Affiliation means Oregon AFL-CIO membership will jump 20 percent

The independent Oregon School Employees Association announced Feb. 5 it will become an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers.

Because AFT is an affiliate of the AFL-CIO, the addition of OSEA means 20,000 more union-represented workers will be under the umbrella of the Oregon AFL-CIO. That brings the total membership of the state labor federation to about 110,000 workers (and that's not counting the open-to-all Working America community organization, which is now 65,000-strong).

AFT-Oregon represents approximately 12,500 school employees and health care professionals. The national union has 850,000 members.

Dating back to 1996, when OSEA and AFT-Oregon signed a "no-raid" mutual assistance agreement, the two organizations have developed a close relationship.

OSEA staff have taken part in AFT training sessions at the AFL-CIO's National Labor College George Meany Campus in Silver Spring, Maryland. And last year, the OSEA Board passed a resolution that laid the groundwork for formal affiliation with AFT. OSEA members approved the affiliation proposal by a five-to-one margin in mail ballots counted Feb. 5 by the League of Women Voters.



Surrounded by staff from OSEA and AFT, OSEA President Merlene Martin takes the call from the League of Women Voters with the news that OSEA members voted overwhelmingly in favor of affiliating with American Federation of Teachers-Oregon. (Photo by Jayna Bergerson)

"This is going to make us stronger," explained OSEA president Merlene Martin.

OSEA, founded in 1938 by a group of school janitors in Lane County, today represents 20,000 workers in 139 bargaining units; 16,000 of them are full-fledged members, while about 4,000 are

non-members who pay their "fair share" of the cost of union representation. OSEA members include employees of school districts, community colleges, education service districts, Head Start agencies, libraries, and park and recreation districts. For the most part, they are so-called "classified employees" —

school support staff in occupational classifications that aren't required to hold teaching certification. They include secretaries, bookkeepers and payroll and accounting clerks; custodians; maintenance workers; groundskeepers; bus drivers; special education, instructional, and library assistants; food service workers;

school nurses; and many other specializations.

AFT-Oregon meanwhile represents many of the same kinds of workers, plus some higher ed teaching faculty and graduate assistants, and nurses and health professionals.

In the late 1990s, OSEA discussed affiliation with AFT and with several other unions, including the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the American Federation of State, County, & Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and the National Education Association (NEA).

OSEA's decision to affiliate comes after two-and-a-half years of internal discussion. AFT has a reputation for autonomy, Martin said, with locals allowed wide latitude to set their own direction. Martin said that was important to OSEA members. With this affiliation, OSEA becomes in effect a second statewide local of AFT; it will keep its own name, identity and structure, including 40 staff, eight field offices and its headquarters in Salem. It will be AFT's fifth-largest local, and the largest on the West Coast.

"This is good for the movement," said Oregon AFL-CIO president Tom Chamberlain. "It helps OSEA members build strength in their political program and in their organizing program."

## Portland Public Schools backs off hardline stance

Portland Public Schools (PPS) appears ready to bury the hatchet after a long-running standoff with three of its unions.

On Feb. 5, PPS announced a tentative agreement on a new contract with Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 757, covering 85 special ed school bus drivers. Hours later, the district announced a tentative deal with 500 custodians and cafeteria workers who belong to Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 503. And three bargaining sessions are scheduled for the second half of February with the union that represents 1,400 clerical and

support staff — Portland Federation of Teachers and Classified Employees (PFTCE), Local 111 of the American Federation of Teachers-Oregon.

PPS' most dramatic turnaround was with SEIU. For months, the district had been demanding pay cuts of up to \$4.25 an hour for the custodians, many of whom were reinstated in 2006 four years after the district illegally outsourced their jobs.

SEIU ramped up pressure on the school board and the district's new superintendent. The union held large protest rallies at district headquarters, got sympathetic state and local elected

leaders to call the district, and aired radio ads on four stations for two weeks to shame the district for its draconian treatment of the custodians. The ads asked listeners to call PPS Superintendent Carole Smith, and made it clear SEIU was prepared to question the district's campaign to get voter approval for funds to upgrade school buildings.

"At some point somebody in the district figured out that trying to get a pound of flesh from this group wasn't worth it," said SEIU Local 503 spokesperson Ed Hershey. "We made the point subtly that with a \$1.4 billion bond issue on the horizon, the last thing

they wanted was for us to question their commitment to maintaining those buildings."

In the end, the district agreed to let custodians keep their current pay — \$13.25 to \$23.62 an hour, depending on experience and the level of responsibility. Cafeteria workers, who make from \$9.62 to \$13.96 now, will get three annual wage increases of 2.5 percent; the first raise will be immediate, but won't be retroactive to July 1, 2007, when the last contract expired.

Cafeteria workers will also get Martin Luther King, Jr. Day as a paid holiday for the first time.

And the district will begin paying as much as \$826 a month for custodian and cafeteria workers' health insurance under a complex formula that now gives them an average of \$698. The district contribution was capped at \$779 in the last contract.

Bargaining unit members reacted to the deal with a combination of exhilaration and relief. They will vote Feb. 16 on whether to ratify the three-year agreement.

With the ATU contract, neither side was releasing all the details as of press time, but both said it's a fair deal, a four-

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