

UNITE leaders try to dissolve hotel/restaurant union merger

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI) — By a 39-23 vote, UNITE HERE's Executive Board on Feb. 9 defeated a motion to dissolve the merger between the old Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE).

The unions merged in July 2004, bringing together 450,000 members.

Reports differ on the reason for the attempted breakup. Edgar Romney, UNITE HERE's executive vice president who led the dissolution, cited a number of factors. But a staffer on the prevailing side told PAI the motive was a plan by General President Bruce Raynor (the former president of UNITE) to withdraw his union and merge it with the Service Employees.

Romney, who also is secretary-treasurer of the Change to Win labor federation, said in a statement after the vote that he "worked hard to hold this union together, in the 'One Union Committee,' and in daily work. But our union is broken and our merger has failed in its mission to organize large numbers of workers to build power for working people. Today, I listened as

vice presidents passionately explained what the deep divisions within the union are doing to our ability to represent members and meet the challenges we face."

Romney also criticized the majority for not discussing the issue openly. He called that another sign of intransigence and said "reconciliation is not possible" in UNITE HERE.

At the time of the merger, HERE had more members than UNITE, and it has since undertaken successful organizing drives in the Las Vegas-based gaming industry. But at the same time, HERE President John Wilhelm became president of the Hospitality Industries sector of the merged union, taking a back seat to Raynor.

Though Romney said all the votes against dissolution came from HERE members, the staffer who spoke to PAI, Tom Snyder, said the vote was not a straight split. He noted one of largest union's joint boards — the 10,000-member New England Board — opposed the dissolution.

Fifteen vice presidents have now joined together in a lawsuit to dissolve the merger.



ILWU rally at Rite Aid

Union members rallied outside Rite Aid stores in four states Feb. 13 to draw attention to the company's anti-union conduct. Some 700 workers at Rite Aid's distribution center in Lancaster, Calif., have been trying to join the International Longshore and Warehouse Union since 2006. In 2007, the federal government was prepared to charge the company with 49 labor law violations for threatening and firing employees, but weak labor laws allowed Rite Aid to evade the violations with only a slap on the wrist and promises to behave in the future. And that hasn't happened. "These abuses are a textbook example of why Congress should pass the Employee Free Choice Act," said George O'Neil (above center) during a noontime rally at a Rite Aid store in Beaverton, Oregon. O'Neil is an international Executive Board member out of Portland's ILWU Local 40. The Employee Free Choice Act is a proposed law that would protect employees and their right to join a union. More than 50 people attended the rally.

SEIU offers wage freeze to ease state budget crisis

SALEM — Reacting to the State of Oregon's budget crisis, the largest union of state employees went public Feb. 12 with a proposal for a two-year freeze of pay steps and eight unpaid furlough days.

Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 503 made the offer at a Feb. 10 contract bargaining session. The union is negotiating a new two-year agreement to replace the one that expires June 30. Local 503 represents more 22,000 workers at 20-plus state agencies and seven universities.

Under SEIU's proposal, there would be no cost-of-living increases, but everything else would stay the same in the new contract — including step increases that reward longevity. The furloughs were suggested by Gov. Ted Kulongoski in his December budget proposal. If all state workers were furloughed, the state could save an estimated \$4 million a day.

Local 503 spokesperson Kathie Best said the union would encourage members to use the furlough days to volunteer in schools, homeless shelters and other community institutions.

As of press time, negotiators for the state had not yet responded to the union's proposal.

Another 7,000 state workers — including workers at state hospitals and prisons — are represented by American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Oregon Council 75. Council 75 Executive Director Ken Allen said his union has been weighing similar proposals. AFSCME was ready to sign off on something of an austerity contract, Allen said — with no cost-of-living raises, and furloughs for some workers — but the governor's office seemed to get cold feet about the deal, not sure if worsening budget situation would make even that unaffordable.

AFSCME's next bargaining session is set for Feb. 23. That's the same day a revised revenue forecast is due; if tax revenues continue to fall, that could lead state administrators to seek wage cuts or layoffs of state employees.



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