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Public employees  
on the march

Front-line public employees joined with their allies in a “United for Oregon” march June 7 in downtown Portland. Organized by Service Employees Local 503, state workers from as far away as Medford and Klamath Falls made the trip to voice concerns about jobs and programs that may be cut from the state budget. The crowd was estimated at 2,500. Just days before the rally the state declared an impasse in bargaining, so members were fired up knowing that the stage had been set for the state to implement its contract and for a possible strike. However, on June 11, the state did an about-face by withdrawing its declaration of impasse — as well as its proposal to impose wage cuts in certain job classifications. Why the sudden turnaround? SEIU spokesman Ed Hershey said the union had filed an unfair labor practice complaint in May after state negotiators substituted unpaid furlough days with pay cuts for workers at institutions that operate around the clock. The union contended the pay cut proposal violated bargaining ground rules because it was submitted months after the deadline for making new proposals. The unfair labor practice charge hadn’t been heard when the state declared impasse. “In certain circumstances,” Hershey explained, “an employer’s declaration of impasse and implementation of a final offer that contains a provision that was unlawfully presented can make the implementation itself unlawful and subject the employer to liability for any backpay or benefit reductions. Fearful of this consequence, Hershey said, “the state apparently decided that its best tactic was to withdraw the pay-cut proposal and undo its impasse declaration.” Bargaining resumed June 15. More worksite actions are scheduled to take place June 30 — the last day of the current contract.

Bill bans mandatory  
anti-union meetings

SALEM — The Worker Freedom Act, which the Oregon AFL-CIO has called its top-priority legislation this year, passed the Oregon Senate June 8 by a 16-14 vote. The bill — SB 519 — is considered likely to pass the Oregon House. As of press time, it was in the House Rules Committee, which held a hearing on it June 11. Gov. Ted Kulongoski is expected to sign it if and when it reaches his desk.

The bill takes aim at a major tactic employers use to squelch unionizing efforts. Employers hold mandatory workplace meetings at which company owners, managers, and outside consultants subject workers to anti-union arguments. Union organizers are excluded from giving an opposing view at the meetings, and pro-union workers can be ordered to remain silent.

“In 95 percent of the private-sector campaigns we’re involved with, employers hold these meetings,” Ken Allen, executive director of Oregon AF-SCME, told members of the House Rules Committee.

Under SB 519, employers would still be allowed to hold these anti-union meetings, but it would become illegal to discipline — or threaten to discipline — workers who refuse to attend. The bill also applies to meetings held to proselytize about religion or politics if those are not work-related. Employees who are fired or disciplined for refusing to attend such meetings can file suit and get reinstatement, back pay, triple damages, and attorney fees.

“Workers should not have to give up their opinions or be lectured about their

employer’s beliefs to get a paycheck,” said Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain.

Oregon AFL-CIO spokesperson Elana Guiney said SB 519 would be the first such state law in the nation, though a New Jersey law passed in 2006 offers similar protections from employer religious or political proselytization.

A similar bill in Washington State was blocked by Democratic leaders earlier this year because Boeing and business lobbying groups aggressively opposed it. Gov. Chris Gregoire, House Speaker Frank Chopp, and Senate Majority Leader Lisa Brown all refused to allow a vote.

In Oregon, all Republicans voted against SB 519, as did two Democrats: Betsy Johnson (D-Scappoose) and Ginny Burdick (D-Portland). Burdick also spoke against the bill on the Senate floor.

Republicans tried a number of parliamentary maneuvers to delay or block the bill, but didn’t have the votes.

Comments from Republicans speaking against the bill suggested that business groups are likely to challenge the law in court. Opponents have argued that SB 519 would violate the National Labor Relations Act, because that federal law, which governs most private-sector union organizing, contains a preemption clause that prevents states from making laws about unionizing. But Guiney said supporters of the bill expect it to survive a legal challenge: Lawyers for the Legislature’s in-house counsel said it does not run afoul of the

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## CWA launches organizing drive at Oregonian mailroom

Anti-union meetings start soon  
after campaign begins

Could workers at the Oregonian unionize? The newspaper busted its unions in a bitter and drawn-out strike from November 1959 to April 1965.

But now, a group of mailroom employees at the paper’s Kittridge Distribution Center in Portland are talking with Communications Workers of America Local 7901 about the possibility of joining the union. The interest comes after an across-the-board pay cut that management announced in March. No one was spared the pay cut, which

was 5 or 10 percent for most workers. In addition, the company froze its pension as of May 15.

But one group of workers got hit worse — part-timers in the mail room, where preprinted ad sections are inserted into the paper. About 90 part-time employees there got pay cuts of 28 percent; workers who made \$18.64 an hour at the beginning of the year now make \$13.62 — and they’re really upset about it.

“When the boss basically says you don’t matter and tosses you under a bus, what can you do?” said one mailroom employee.

The Oregonian is part of the Newhouse Newspaper chain, a division of Advance Publications based in New York.

At one time, the paper had a reputation for generosity, paying

above union scale in what may have been a maneuver to dampen any potential interest in unionizing. Pizza parties, pension benefits, paid vacation, fully paid health coverage, and copious overtime (which kicked in after 7.5 hours) made the mailroom a desirable place to work, mailroom workers say. Now, the pension is frozen, medical co-pays and employee contributions are creeping up, and the wages just got slashed so severely that it’ll be a whole new lifestyle for those who remain.

Management isn’t ignoring union talk among mailroom workers. Workers say two mass meetings in the mailroom, plus small group meetings, have been held to counter the union drive.

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