

Civil and human rights conference focuses on getting voice at the table

More than 80 people attended a Civil and Human Rights Conference in Portland Oct. 24 sponsored by Service Employees (SEIU) Local 503.

Local 503's Human and Civil Rights Committee Chair Rose Kachadoorian spoke about how unions are about fairness and equality, and that by creating a culture of inclusion, the strength of the union could be increased.

Keynote speaker Dr. Daniel Hosang, a professor at the University of Oregon, inspired the audience with stories of "linked fate," and encouraged participants to recognize that "strangers matter." He encouraged SEIU to develop strategies with the Civil and Human Rights Committee in a central role, and he urged action.

B.G. Gray, of SEIU's African-American (AFRAM) Caucus, reminded attendees, "We are

not the descendants of slaves; we are the descendants of proud people who were captives. We need to change how we think about ourselves."

Immigration panel members discussed personal experiences with racism and in finding work. One panelist explained how "little" racist comments end up killing "little" pieces inside of you. Another, a highly trained doctor in Ukraine, is now a home care worker because policies in Oregon prevent her from practicing medicine. A third panelist spoke of discriminatory practices against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) foreign nationals; and the escalating murder rate of

gays in Iraq.

A panel of lawyers helped audience members understand discrimination claims. Portland attorney Cathy Highet stressed that public employees should file a tort claim notice within six months of an incident.

Lloyd Perez of the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries emphasized that the employee bears the burden of proof in discrimination claims and the importance of getting a lawyer.

Members of Local 503's Lavender Caucus recalled that early on they faced resistance from some members who said it was not the business of the union to take a position protecting the rights of LGBT members. Now, they said, most members realize the interconnection of issues.

A transsexual SEIU member said that many individuals face intolerable discrimination from managers and co-workers during the physical transition period. This contributes to "disturbingly high unemployment, poverty and suicide rates" among transsexuals.

Octaviano Merecias and "Bajo Salario" (Low Wages), a progressive Latin American folklore group, read poetry and provided music during lunch.

In a wrap-up, among the suggestions was one that diversity training be made an integral part of staff and steward in-service training, and that multigenerational workplace training be a component of any diversity training.

Paul Coke, a SEIU member, explained it's about all people having a voice at the table.



SEIU members Amy Tucker and James Jacobson pitch their union's new Equal Rights brochure. Photo by Roxy Barnstead.

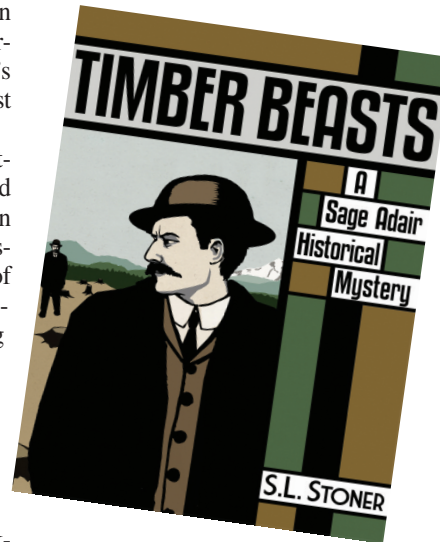
Murder tale brings Northwest labor history back to life

For 10 years, union attorney Susan Stoner has had a secret: In between arbitrations and grievance-handling, she's been moonlighting as mystery novelist S.L. Stoner.

Stoner — general counsel at Portland-headquartered Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757 — worked in her free time to develop a series of historical mysteries set in the Portland of 1902. Now the first self-published installment is in print, and is garnering favorable reactions from local historians and labor history buffs.

Jim Strassmeier, longtime oral historian for the Oregon Historical Society, called it a "unique, genre-crossing novel" that "combines rousing adventure with accurate back-to-the-past details."

The book, titled "Timber Beasts: A Sage Adair Historical Mystery," is available at Portland-area Barnes & Noble stores, downtown Powell's Books and online at barnesandnoble.com and powells.com. It's the story of Sage Adair, a turn-of-the-century trade union spy, who stumbles across a real-life timber fraud, gets a glimpse at the savage exploitation of loggers, and helps track a murderer. In yet-to-be-published sequels, Adair investigates a shanghaiing, a series of bridge collapses, and an attempt to assassinate Teddy Roosevelt, who visited Portland May 21, 1903.



Careful not to reveal plot points, Stoner answered questions about the book in an interview with the Northwest Labor Press.

What made you decide to write a historical mystery novel?

I love researching original history. That means reading diaries and letters and newspaper articles that were published at the time. And I've always been interested in labor history in particular. I wanted something that union members and working people could read to learn about their own role in history. Plus I

love mystery novels. They're an easy read and they're entertaining.

Why did you choose 1902?

Because it really mirrors our time. On a national level we had corporate power starting to take over.

Are there particular works that you drew inspiration from, books you like and sought to emulate?

I'd have to say Howard Zinn's People's History of the United States, and then Zane Grey for his Western flavor.

To what extent are the events depicted real?

I tried really hard to make them all realistic. I mess a little bit with the times things occur. But I plagiarized history. So everything is based on something that actually happened. The description of a logging camp, the description of Chinatown ... I tried to make everything authentic.

Why is it called Timber Beasts?

It's a play on words. It was the name they gave itinerant workers in logging, and it was said with contempt. But when you start thinking about large corporations that made money off the decimation of the forests and people's livelihoods, you see who the real beasts are.

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