

Portland renews use of prison labor in parks

For Portland City Council, it seemed like a routine matter: reauthorizing the use of prisoner labor in city parks. But Laborers Local 483 Business Manager Richard Beetle saw something objectionable about it.

"I think it's really embarrassing that we have to reduce ourselves to this level to provide services," Beetle told City Council at an Oct. 28 session. Local 483 represents about 600 city workers, including 92 employed by Portland Parks and Recreation, which is overseen by Commissioner Nick Fish.

Beetle told City Council that the Park bureau's use of prison labor is just part of a shift toward a "low-road" labor model, with heavy reliance on low-wage part-time temporary seasonal employees. Union employment at Parks and Recreation has fallen one-sixth in the last seven years.

Meanwhile, since 2003, the City has used 10-man work crews from the Columbia River Correctional Institute, a minimum security prison in Northeast Portland. Dressed in uniforms that say "inmate," they clear brush, pick up leaves, clean up homeless camps and

storm damage, spread gravel and bark dust, and dig irrigation ditches. Only lower-level inmates with good behavior are let out for the work, and they're supervised by a corrections officer.

In the 2008-2009 fiscal year, Parks and Recreation used 71 one-day inmate work crews, totaling 5,399 hours of work, according to figures the bureau provided to the union. In return, the City paid \$81,446 to Columbia River Correctional Institute. That works out to \$15 an hour per worker.

Prisoners on the Parks work crews get paid in prison scrip valued at \$2 an hour, which they spend in the prison commissary. They cannot be unionized.

Parks and Recreation has also used offenders doing court-ordered community service since 1984, including 859 individuals in 2008, for a total of 10,245 work hours.

Beetle was one of four citizens to testify against the reauthorization. John Ross, speaking for the Portland Jobs with Justice Economic Justice Committee, called the practice "exploitative," and urged the council to end to the use of prison labor by the City and

restore the work to union workers at union wages. Doug Nolan, an unemployed University of Oregon grad, brought his résumé and asked that Parks jobs be given to out-of-work Portlanders, not prisoners — particularly at a time when there are so few jobs. "Ted," a former work crew inmate, said he's concerned that prison labor displaces other workers.

After the testimony, Commissioner Randy Leonard said he found some of the comments offensive, adding that he would have loved to have had such a labor-friendly council when he was a firefighter union president in the 1990s.

"It's not exploiting prison labor," Leonard said. "They are very happy to be outside doing something."

Mayor Sam Adams said he hadn't heard any evidence that convict labor is supplanting union jobs.

Council members voted 5-0 to renew for another two years the agreement with Columbia River Correctional Institute.

Beetle told the Labor Press he was disappointed in the Council.

"I resent them saying this is for the benefit of the inmates," Beetle said. "I've interviewed some of the convicts, and they'd pull blackberries willingly rather than be in there. This is not voluntary labor. It's forced labor."

State prison inmates are required to work or be in school 40 hours a week under Ballot Measure 17, a state constitutional amendment approved by Oregon voters in 1994.

"I'm not trying to demonize this workforce," Beetle said, "but anytime someone comes into my jurisdiction and does my members' work for less or no money, I'm going to fight it."

"The message I got from the Council is that as long as it's just Local 483 that's concerned, they're not going to do anything about it," Beetle said. "What we need to do is bring the wider community and the rest of the labor community into the discussion."

Bill and Cindy Sizemore indicted for tax evasion

SALEM —The Oregon Department of Justice has filed tax evasion charges against Republican gubernatorial candidate Bill Sizemore and his wife Cindy.

A grand jury indicted the Sizemores on three counts each of evading Oregon personal income taxes, alleging the couple failed to file tax returns in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

The Justice Department was alerted of possible criminal conduct based on evidence made public during American Federation of Teachers (AFT)-Oregon and the Oregon Education Associa-

tion's civil lawsuit where Sizemore and his organizations were found guilty of setting up fraudulent charities in order to funnel money into ballot measure campaigns, or to use for personal expenses. As a result, Sizemore was banned from managing any future charities.

The indictments were issued by the grand jury Oct. 27, but not unsealed until after a state tax amnesty period ended Nov. 19. The tax amnesty was an opportunity for taxpayers to file or amend tax returns in exchange for a waiver of civil penalties and partial interest.

Sizemore filed paperwork to run for governor on Nov. 23.

Shop with a conscience this holiday

With the rise of globalization and outsourcing, the shopper's dilemma is especially acute when buying clothes. You don't want your holiday shopping dollars enriching an absentee CEO who takes advantage of the North Pole's weak labor regulations to force his workers to churn out product night and day year-round. (His apologists will tell you he's "jolly." But there's nothing jolly about a repetitive stress injury.)

What's a conscientious consumer to do?

Never fear! The International Labor Rights Forum and SweatFree Communities have stepped into the breach with the latest edition of their Shop With a Conscience Consumer Guide, which lists tons of places you can buy sweatshop-free clothing for everyone on your list (www.sweatfree.org).

And their 2010 Sweatshop Hall of Shame (www.laborrights.org) is a handy list of retail outlets that don't deserve your business until the way they treat the men and women who make their products moves from "naughty" to "nice."

They've even got these materials available as PDF brochures (Consumer Guide, Hall of Shame), suitable for printing out and taking with you to the mall. Heck, you could even print out some extra copies and hand them out to other shoppers while you're there, you know?

So this year, don't give lumps of coal to the men and women who make the gifts you give — shop sweatshop-free!

(Editor's Note: This article originally appeared at CtWconnect, the Web site of Change to Win.)




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NITA SENDS YOU THIS MESSAGE:

My name is Nita. I worked for [Kroger owned] Fred Meyer for over 19 years. I am 70 years old. On June 29, 2009 I was called into my store director's office and told that I had handed a customer back their check in the amount of \$12.30 and was being terminated for this. I told my store director "You know I'm raising my granddaughter." He told me it was out of his hands, it's a corporate policy. I asked him about my medical coverage and he responded that I only had medical coverage for 2 more days.

During my 19 years with Fred Meyer I was a very dependable employee, received great reviews and had no other disciplinary issues. I had built relationships with customers and coworkers and considered Fred Meyer my family. I worked hard for my job and loved it. Fred Meyer never gave me a penny. I worked hard for every penny I earned. How am I going to find another job with these wages and benefits?

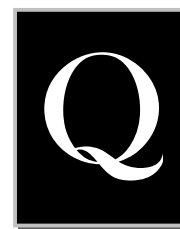
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