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To settle legal claims

Umatilla demilitarization workers get $3.7 million

t can really pay to be union — up to $20,000. On Dec. 17 and 18, about 300 unionized civilian workers at the U.S. Army's Umatilla Chemical Agent Disposal Facility got checks totaling $3,685,098.98 to settle claims over missed breaks and non-payment for putting on and taking off protective gear.

Workers at the 24-hour-a-day facility disassemble munitions and incinerate chemical agents like sarin nerve gas and HD mustard gas. They are members of International Union of Operating Engineers Local 701 and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 112. The two unions bargain together as the Demilitarization Trades Council with their employer, federal contractor URS EG&G. The settlement was the backpay equivalent of 48 minutes of compensation for each shift worked from February 2007 to February 2009; checks averaged over $12,000.

The settlement came thanks to the vigilance of stewards, and union persistence in pursuing apparent violations of the Fair Labor Standards Act and terms of the collective bargaining agreement. Nonunion employees, including clerks, supervisors, and subcontractors, also benefited; Local 701 Assistant Business Manager Nelda Wilson said the total payout by the company was about $4.2 million. Accepting the payment meant workers waived their individual right to sue the company for unpaid wages. Local 701 was also able to negotiate paid lunch breaks going forward, which had the effect of shortening the work day to 12 hours for most members.

At the Umatilla Chemical Agent Disposal Facility, union stewards and reps stand before nearly $3.7 million in checks going out to members. The checks cap a long campaign by the Demilitarization Trades Council (Operating Engineers Local 701 and IBEW Local 112) to get employer URS EG&G to pay for donning and doffing protective gear. From left to right: James Liles, DTC steward in Maintenance; Richard Herrera, DTC steward in Operations; Colin Winters, DTC steward in Maintenance; Mike Escobedo, DTC steward in Operations; J. Jon Shaw, DTC steward in Operations; Dave Davis, IBEW Local 112 business representative; Nelda Wilson, IUOE Local 701 assistant business manager and lead negotiator; Rod Osgood, IUOE Local 701 business representative; and Jonathan Donehower, IUOE Local 701 General Council. Not pictured are Victor Melling, DTC steward in Operations; and Adrian Skinner, DTC steward in Maintenance.

Wilson expressed tremendous frustration, however, with the role the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) played in the settlement. The agency is supposed to enforce the law that was allegedly violated, but Wilson said the DOL had to be cajoled into doing its job, and then proposed to let the company off the hook with a lower settlement amount.

Union complaints led to a second DOL investigation and a larger settlement. Finally, months of bureaucratic foot-dragging by the DOL delayed approval of the settlement. Union stewards got members to call and write to put pressure on the agency, Wilson said, and Local 701 even appealed to the office of U.S. Sen. Merkley for help. A call to the DOL from the senator's office seemed to speed things up, and the workers got their due — just in time for Christmas.

Opponents of Measures 66 and 67 try to hide facts

On Jan. 26, Oregonians get to decide whether corporations and the rich should pay a little more in state taxes. But "No on 66 and 67" television ads, funded by corporations and rich individuals, make it sound like the tax increases affect ordinary people. "Tell state government to tighten its belt like the rest of us," says the latest. In another, an actor pretends to worry about "retroactive taxes."

The ads are paid for by a business-funded coalition that had raised $3.58 million as of Jan. 4. After the Oregon Legislature passed the increases in June, the business group paid signature gatherers to refer them to voters.

But organized labor is defending the increases, which are the first major move toward tax fairness in decades. The increases amount to no more than 2 percent of a part of the incomes of the richest 2.5 percent of Oregon taxpayers — and $150 for most corporations doing business in the state.

Labor's involvement is making it an even fight. No labor organization in the state is opposing the measures.

To crunch numbers and rebut opposing arguments, the labor-backed coalition Vote Yes For Oregon hired tax policy analyst (and former U.S. Senate candidate) Steve Novick. Novick, whose father and brother were union organizers, took time last week to answer questions from the Labor Press.

Will these tax increases "kill jobs?"

In terms of creating jobs, what you want is more money spent in the Oregon economy. The money raised by these tax measures, plus federal matching funds that we'll receive, will be spent by teachers, home health care workers, and nurses in the local economy. By contrast, rich people tend to spend some of their money on European vacations or investments in the New York Stock Exchange. On the corporate side, most of the biggest checks will be written by large out-of-state corporations, from Eli Lilly to Proctor & Gamble, to Chase Bank.

Will rich people move away and take jobs with them?

What you have to imagine is that a friend of yours comes up to you and says, 'Well, it's been nice knowing you, but I've been offered a job in another state with a pay increase of 1 percent, and I just can't turn that down.' If you look at the hundred richest ZIP codes in America, 30 are in California or New York, some of the highest tax places. The fact is, rich people like to live in nice places. And Measures 66 and 67 will help preserve Oregon as a nice place.

What about the argument that state shouldn't be increasing spending during a recession?

Let's look at the ad they have on right now, which says that state spending has gone up by $4.7 billion: 75 percent of that is the federal government gave us more money for unemployment benefits, food stamps, and Medicaid for people who've lost their jobs and health insurance. What do they want us to do, throw the money back and let people go hungry?

What about the public employee salary increases?

Here are the facts: State employees are getting $22 million in step increases, and giving up $51 million by having furlough days. So state employee salaries are actually going down.

Will this hurt small businesses?

First of all, 93 percent of small business owners don't make enough money to be affected by Measure 66. Most of the 7 percent that are affected are people that don't actually make their money from the small business. If you're rich,

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