

Portland French School broke law to fight union

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) says Portland French School committed multiple violations of U.S. labor law in its fight against a unionizing campaign by employees.

Portland French School, at 6318 Southwest Corbett Avenue, is a private school offering French language immersion from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Earlier this year, teachers and other employees announced their intention to join American Federation of Teachers (AFT)-Oregon. On March 8, they turned in a petition signed by most of the staff asking management to recognize the union.

The next day, school head Elimane Mbengue told the school's immigration attorney to stop work on a work visa renewal for teacher Patricia Raclot, a leader of the effort. Raclot is a French citizen.

In the weeks that followed, Mbengue and several of the school board members told workers that unionizing would stigmatize the school, scare away parents, and lead to closure of the school.

Workers were asked what their complaints were about the school, and promised those grievances would be resolved without the need for a union.

Engaging employees in the lobby,

SEIU locals back Collymore for county position

Services Employees International Union (SEIU) Locals 49 and 503 have endorsed Karol Collymore for Multnomah County commissioner.

Collymore worked as a staffer for Jeff Cogen when he was a county commissioner. Cogen vacated his seat in May to run for the open county chair. He was elected, and now Collymore is running to fill the unexpired term.

Collymore beat out a field of seven candidates seeking the post in the May primary, garnering 35.9 percent of the vote. Second place went to Loretta Smith, a field representative for Sen. Ron Wyden, with 18.4 percent.

Since no candidate received 50 percent plus one, Collymore and Smith are in a runoff in November.

In addition to SEIU, Collymore has endorsements from Communications Workers of America Local 7901 and Multnomah County Employees Local 88, which issued a dual endorsement in the race. Local 88 is an affiliate of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

Smith has been endorsed by United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555, the Columbia Pacific Building and Construction Trades Council, the Northwest Oregon Labor Council, the Oregon Nurses Association, Teamsters Joint Council 37, and the National Association of Letter Carriers Branch 82.

Mbengue asked them to bring complaints to him directly, and threatened swift and severe discipline and discharges. The school introduced an unlawful "no complaining" rule against staff sharing frustrations with each other about the job. And it enforced other rules selectively only against union supporters.

On March 22, Mbengue told staff that he had the "biggest card to play" in a union campaign, and that all of the employees were smart enough to know what that means. The next day, Raclot was informed her teaching contract would not be renewed for the 2010-11 school year.

All this conduct, illegal under federal labor law, had tremendous effect on the organizing campaign, said AFT-Oregon organizer Eban Pullman.

"We went from having a substantial majority of 70 percent when we filed cards," Pullman said, "to having employees withdraw support after promises were made by management."

In a union election held April 16, support staff voted 7 to 3 to unionize, but teachers were split 12 to 12. AFT-Oregon is challenging the outcome, however. The NLRB could order a rerun of the election if it determines that employer law-breaking contributed to the union losing majority support.

A federal administrative law judge will hear the case beginning Oct. 19 in Portland.

Thus far, Portland French School, represented by the employer-side labor law firm Barran Liebman, has refused to reinstate Raclot. Because her contract was cancelled, her visa has expired, but Immigration and Customs Enforcement is not pursuing deportation proceedings, in accord with an inter-agency agreement with the NLRB. The NLRB maintains Raclot was terminated because she's a union supporter.



More buses, please

What if bus riders unionized? In Portland, the closest thing may be the Bus Riders Unite project of Organizing People, Activating Leaders (OPAL). The group organizes low-income and minority communities to campaign for clean air, fresh water, and healthy neighborhoods. Buses are part of that mission. OPAL is demanding that TriMet provide affordable and reliable mass transit service for working people. Members have been testifying at TriMet board meetings for months, opposing a set of service cuts and fare increases. On Sept. 1, the fare increases and service cuts took effect, and about 75 protesters marched with picket signs on Southwest Fourth Avenue outside City Hall. The picket was co-sponsored by Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757, which represents TriMet employees, and had support from union members like Gil Whitfield, pictured above. Whitfield, a kitchen worker at Expo Center, is a member of UNITE HERE Local 9 and takes the bus to work. "[Bus service] is not something we want," said Shannon Olive, OPAL's lead bus organizer. "It's something we need. Give us what we need: More buses!"

Labor Day 'Tweeters'

LOS ANGELES — People who work in the sports, entertainment and news media industries spent Labor Day weekend "tweeting" about the advantages of being a union member.

Some of those participating were Tampa Bay third baseman Evan Longoria; Minnesota outfielder Michael Cuddey; Texas pitcher C.J. Wilson; CSI: NY star Hill Harper; Breaking Bad star R.J. Mitte; and Grammy-winning Foo Fighters' lead guitarist Chris Shiflett.

Their message: Labor Day is not just a day to commemorate the opportunities that labor unions have achieved in years past. It's a day to broadcast the critical role unions play today for all workers.

The Labor Day Tweet-a-Thon was a joint project of workers' rights group American Rights at Work, Actors' Equity, AFTRA, and Screen Actors Guild, and the Major League Baseball Players Association.



A Labor Day message from the Machinists

Machinists District Lodge 24 delivered a Happy Labor Day message to Portland-area residents via this electronic billboard located at 122nd and Southeast Division Street in Portland. The message went up Friday, Sept. 3 and ran throughout the long Labor Day weekend. On Sept. 7, a new message was posted encouraging workers to call the union if they are having problems at work.

Catholic Bishops call for new social pact

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI) — The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has called for the nation to construct a "new social contract" that insists upon the dignity and value of workers, even in an era of globalization.

"More than ever, the dignity of the worker is a foundation upon which we should measure much of what is good, and not so good, in the financial, industrial, and service sectors of our economy and our world," said Bishop William Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., in the conference's annual Labor Day message.

The bishops' Labor Day statement follows in a Catholic social justice tradition — including open support for unions — first stated by Pope Leo XIII in 1891. But many conservative Catholics, especially in positions of power in the political and corporate worlds, have paid little attention to church teachings on social justice.

Those same teachings, however, have strongly influenced both union members and Catholic priest-activists, in the United States and abroad.

Murphy, quoting present Pope Benedict XVI, said "the centrality of integral human development" is basic in coping with "the challenges of an interdependent world."

"Here the economic realities of one nation or one society are constantly being influenced by some or all of the economies and cultures of the rest of the world," and notably by globalization, the bishops' statement conceded.

Continuing to quote the present pope, Murphy "would like to remind everyone, especially governments engaged in boosting the world's economic and social assets, that the primary capital to be safeguarded and valued is man, the human person in his or her integrity."

That led him to sharply criticize employers who mistreat workers, especially those who shortchange workers' wages or lock their retail employees in stores after hours for more work while refusing to pay legally required overtime.

"Families struggling to make ends meet cannot have wage earners shortchanged on overtime or not get paid for all the hours they work. The dignity of the person is diminished when poor or middle-class people are denied their full wage or just compensation for their hard work," the bishop declared.

And he said "intermediary institutions, including voluntary associations could be a means to restrain, mediate, or hold accountable both the state and the marketplace ... Pope Benedict believes this."