

Oregon Education Assn. leaders discuss future of schools

Around the nation, teachers unions are under attack, facing proposals to diminish their collective bargaining rights, lower teacher licensing requirements, eliminate seniority rights, and replace step pay scales with “merit

pay” set-ups based on student test scores. The Labor Press spoke with Richard Sanders and Gail Rasmussen of the Oregon Education Association about the fight. Sanders became OEA’s executive director in January — after

decades in Massachusetts as a union organizer and trainer. Gail Rasmussen, a longtime support worker in Oregon’s Eagle Point School District, is in her second and final two-year term as OEA president.

Will anything be different this school year for teachers or students as a result of battles that were fought this year in the Oregon Legislature?

Yet standardized testing is central to the idea that teacher pay should be linked to test score improvements — instead of experience on the job.

Sanders: People who work in education show up at school every day determined to do wonderful things for students. But when this school year opens, it will be another in a succession of years where the state has continued its disinvestment in education. There will be at least 10 percent fewer people working in the schools than there were just a couple of years ago. The state will be spending nearly \$3 billion less than the funding goal for education that was set a decade ago. Class sizes will be much greater in most school districts, and supplies will be more dated or lacking altogether. Yet people will go into the classroom and do their best.

What would K-12 education look like if OEA really were the most powerful political force in Oregon, as some people assert?

Rasmussen: For one, we would have a sustainable revenue source.

Sanders: The people who do the work in schools would sit at the decision making tables as equal partners. Students would be known by educators because they’re not overwhelmed by the number of students. There’d be investment in people. Buildings would be clean and modern and safe, technology appropriately used, textbooks up-to-date. There’d be art, music, sports in the schools. It’s not that complicated to reform education if you’re willing to invest money in frameworks that work.

What we know doesn’t work is an increased reliance on a test regime to determine whether children are making progress. This test-driven model, built on punitive structures for teachers, is not what the rest of the world is doing, and it’s not what the affluent in this country support for their own children.

Sanders: There’s a corporate agenda here. It’s part of the assault on the public sector in general, and part of an assault on public employees. It’s easy to blame teachers when you want to get away from the focus on the disinvestment in education and the public sector and in our communities. They also argue that experience doesn’t matter. That’s completely contrary to evidence. If you just look at test results, teachers in their first three to five years have far less success. And 50 percent of educators leave within in the first five years.

In teachers union contracts, a step pay schedule rewards employees for sticking around, and seniority is a factor in transfer and layoff. Seniority is a historic union principle, but teachers unions in particular are being criticized for it. Why is it worth defending?

Sanders: It’s really interesting that education is virtually the only profession where experience is now being devalued and actively attacked. There may be geniuses, like a rookie of the year, but exceptions aside, in every other profession, there’s great value attached to experience. The senior partner in a law firm gets more money than the junior — there’s a recognition that years of experience contributes to wisdom and technical expertise that’s of higher value. In the medical profession, do you want the intern to be doing the heart surgery, or the experienced doctor?

Rasmussen: Do you take a brand new MBA and expect them to run a bank?

Sanders: This kind of education re-

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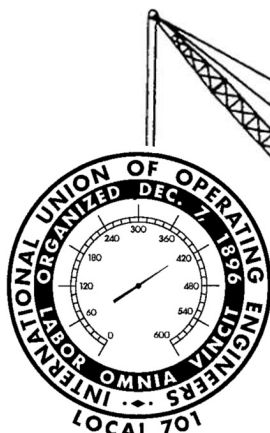
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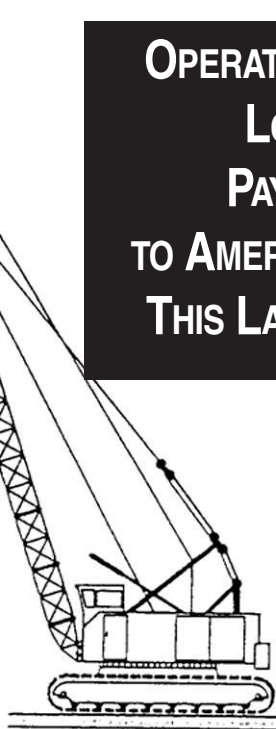
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