

# Fundraiser for OSPIRG fires two workers who helped form a union

**Employees at Fund for the Public Interest's Portland call center voted in October to unionize with CWA**

A non-profit fundraiser for OSPIRG and its spinoff group Environment Oregon has fired two workers who helped lead a campaign to unionize. On Oct. 12, workers at the Portland call center run by the Fund for the Public Interest voted 19-to-5 to join Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 7901. In December, the Fund terminated Kris Humbird and Mike Schultz — two of the three workers who were elected to the union's contract bargaining team.

Fund for the Public Interest is a national non-profit organization that is linked to the state public interest advocacy groups known as PIRGs. The Fund runs PIRG canvass operations in multiple states, and telephone outreach call centers in Boston, Sacramento and Portland.

The Fund may have a history of union-busting. According to one press account, after Fund workers in Los Angeles voted in 2005 to unionize, management fired union supporters, refused to negotiate, and put a freeze on new hiring in the high-turnover workplace. Eleven months after the union vote, the Fund closed the Los Angeles office altogether, and moved the operation to Sacramento.

Humbird, 33, says he learned of the Los Angeles case soon after he began working for the Fund six years ago, when a donor told him he would no longer give to CalPIRG because it was a union-buster.

Will the Fund similarly try to bust the union campaign at the Portland office? After the union vote, workers say, the Fund directed the Portland office to stop calling a donor list for U.S. PIRG. It transferred that list to the Sacramento call center, and gave the Portland call center less lucrative lists. For example, the Portland callers were made to ask for end-of-year donations from donors who'd given just months before, or were given donors to Environment Colorado who had moved out of Colorado. Soon after, three workers were placed on probation for failing to meet fundraising quotas, and a fourth worker, Schultz, was fired.

As for Humbird, officially he was fired for calling in sick too late. He says that was a pretext.

Local 7901 has filed three charges with the National Labor Relations Board alleging that the Fund broke federal labor law — for firing Humbird, changing the list, and refusing to provide information about the list after the union asked for it in bargaining.

It also appears the Fund may have

outsourced calling for Environment Oregon to Gordon and Schwenkmeyer Inc., a for-profit telemarketing firm based in El Segundo, California.

Job security was one of several motives workers had for unionizing, says Local 7901 President Madelyn Elder. Workers would like a fairer pay system, she says, including more control over the quotas they're judged by. Workers start at \$8.50 an hour and can rise to \$14.50. Every 80 hours, they're evaluated; if they meet targets, their hourly pay goes up 50 cents, but if they do poorly, the pay can drop much more than 50 cents. There are also bonuses that average \$40 every two weeks, depending on how much money they raise on the phone. But workers who don't meet the weekly quota are placed on "ultimatum," and if they miss the quota two weeks in a row, they're terminated — regardless of how long they've worked there. Workers interviewed by the Labor Press said they may work one or two four-hour shifts from 1 to 9 p.m., but are prevented from working full-time. They have no paid sick days or any other paid time off.

"There's a long history in the Fund of treating workers as if they're disposable," said Schultz, also 33, who was fired for missing quota.

Schultz said he worked as a canvasser for the Fund from 2001-2005, and had been in the call center six months when he was fired for missing quotas on the new list two weeks in a row. Workers have no say in choosing or preparing the call lists or setting the quotas.

"I feel like I was fired because I was one of the most vocal pro-union people in the office," Schultz told the Labor Press.

The workers have set up a support page on Facebook: Portland T.O.P. Unite. They also wrote a letter to the heads of OSPIRG and Environment Oregon, asking them to intervene. Humbird said their replies were nearly identical: The groups said they only contract with the Fund, and that they believe the Fund is negotiating in good faith.

Workers also wear red CWA T-shirts on Wednesdays, and have borrowed tactics from Occupy Wall Street: Before a shift begins, a worker will yell, "mic check!" and co-workers will

respond, setting up a group amplification system to voice complaints about the list and fired co-workers.

On Dec. 15, workers and supporters staged a picket — and caroling — outside the Fund office, 1536 SE 11th Ave.

Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain met with OSPIRG executive director David Rosenfeld to convey labor's concerns.

"I told him workers should be treated fairly, and to me this didn't pass the sniff test," Chamberlain said.

The state labor federation has at times worked closely with OSPIRG in the Oregon Legislature.

"We're going to support our affiliate CWA and the workers at that call center, whatever it takes," Chamberlain told the Labor Press. "The rights of those workers outweigh any relationship we may have with OSPIRG."

Rosenfeld did not return a call from the Labor Press.

The union bargaining team has met with management just once to bargain a contract — for four hours in November — with the Fund's National Telephone Outreach Project Director Pat Wood. Another bargaining session is scheduled for Jan. 10-11.



## 'Spirit of Giving' for our furry friends

TANGENT, Ore. — IBEW Local 280 raised over \$1,000 this year for its "Spirit of Giving Sheltered Animal Drive." The money was used to purchase "Kong" dog toys, rawhide bones, blankets, food, detergent, bleach, and grooming supplies for dogs and cats at the Linn County and Lane County animal shelters. Additionally, the local's Executive Board granted both shelters \$750 each for veterinary expenses. Money was raised through membership donations and from the local's public service fund. Money for that fund comes from a cents-per-hour checkoff negotiated in the union's collective bargaining agreement with contractors.

"We are very happy to say that every dog in both shelters received a dog toy and rawhide bone for Christmas, and every cat received a toy, too," said Local 280 receptionist Sherri Wallman, who coordinates the fundraiser.

"Many people forget about the homeless, neglected and abused animals this time of year," Wallman said. "Most people are aware of, and donate to, the Humane Society, but they forget about the county shelters. Unfortunately, they look at these shelters as the 'Dog Pound,' which is the farthest thing from the truth."

Wallman said the two animal shelters she selected work hard to find homes for lost, abused, and neglected animals. Last year the shelters found homes for 91 percent of the 2,894 dogs and cats they took in.

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