

Portland Jobs with Justice leader Butler stepping down

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

After 16 years leading Portland Jobs with Justice, Margaret Butler is stepping down as the group's executive director on Feb. 15, 2013. Her replacement is Karly Edwards, a longtime UNITE HERE organizer, who starts Oct. 15.

"People who do non-profit consulting recommend 15 years is the max for someone to be in a leadership position," Butler told the Labor Press. "You don't want an organization to be about one person's leadership."

Jobs with Justice (JwJ) is many things, but at its most basic, it fosters solidarity: Workers and activists come out to support struggles for economic justice in the workplace, in the streets, and at city hall. Butler was the Portland chapter's co-founder and first staffperson. Fellow activists describe her as a

patient organizer who skillfully defused internal disagreements and helped maintain unity.

Butler also co-chairs JwJ's national board of directors, which is composed of representatives of nine labor unions, nine local JwJ coalitions, and nine community organizations.

"Margaret embodies the vision and the spirit of Jobs with Justice," says Sarita Gupta, executive director of national JwJ.

"In many respects, Portland Jobs with Justice has been a model in our network," Gupta says, "taking on campaigns and sticking with them for the long haul, and actually winning and making a difference in workers lives."

Butler — a Portland native — grad-



MARGARET BUTLER

uated from Franklin High School in 1975, and earned a history degree at Lewis & Clark College. Her ideas were shaped by five months she spent in Kenya through the college's overseas program, but also by her first encounter with the union movement. Her parents were librarians, and Butler, too, went to

work for the Multnomah County Library in 1977. One month in, she joined an effort by workers to unionize. That experience led Butler to pursue other opportunities for labor activism.

At age 23, she got a job as a directory assistance operator for the phone company and got active with Communications Workers of America (CWA)

Local 7901. She worked for the phone company 10 years, becoming steward, chief steward, and local vice president. In 1991, she helped found Portland Jobs with Justice. The following year she was tapped by Larry Cohen, then organizing director for CWA, to come work for the national union as an organizer. In 1996, she became Portland JwJ's first staffperson.

Sixteen years later, Portland JwJ is a coalition with 92 member organizations (including about 60 local unions), a 6,200-address e-mail list, and a 1,000-strong phone tree. It's still grassroots: The groups annual budget of \$241,000 comes from grants, fundraisers, and voluntary contributions and supports a staff of four, and much of the group's work takes place in committees, including a well-attended monthly steering committee meeting where union delegates and allies strategize about protest

mobilizations.

"We have helped many many groups of workers win unions, and win contracts," Butler says, looking back. "Whether they would have done it without us or not, you can't tell. But I do know that we made a significant difference in lots of campaigns."

On the other hand, Butler says, neither JwJ nor the wider labor movement have turned around the downward slide of working people, nor have they won back collective bargaining rights.

Butler, 55, has no specific plans yet after her departure except to see her daughter Lorene off to college. But whatever she does next, it will be connected to the movement, she says.

"It's too interesting a time to seriously contemplate giving up," Butler said. "This economic crisis is a dangerous time for the labor movement, but it's also an opportunity."

JwJ merges with American Rights at Work

Jobs with Justice and American Rights at Work — two union-supported national organizations — are merging.

Jobs with Justice, founded by Communications Workers of America president Larry Cohen, is a 25-year old network of local labor-community coalitions that specializes in pickets in support of worker struggles. American Rights at Work, founded by Michigan Congressman David Bonior, is a D.C.-based research and policy advocacy group that built a case for the Employee Free Choice Act (a bill in Congress that

would make it easier for workers to unionize and get a first union contract). With the failure of Congress to pass the Employee Free Choice Act, American Rights at Work needed new direction.

"A lot of key labor stakeholders and leaders of both organizations said we share a fundamental mission: protecting and expanding the right to organize and collectively bargain," said Jobs with Justice Executive Director Sarita Gupta, who leads the merged group. "American Rights at Work does it through research, policy, and communications, and Jobs

with Justice does it through mobilization, solidarity, strategic campaigns and educating the base. So the question is, 'How could these two capacities come together to build a more effective organization that's committed to advance workers rights in a new era?'"

The merged group will keep both group names for the time being, but with combined staff and boards of directors. Twelve employees of JwJ and eight from ARW staff will work together in the current American Rights at Work office in Washington, D.C.

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