

Hyatt Hotel signs rare 'labor peace' agreement in Portland

UNITE HERE, the union that represents hotel workers, has reached a landmark neutrality agreement with Hyatt Hotels and Resorts that could make it easier for workers to unionize at a planned convention center headquarters hotel.

Mortenson Development Inc. is asking the Portland Development Commission (PDC), Portland City Council, and the Metro regional government for a package of public incentives for a privately-built privately-operated hotel operation, which could consist of one or two hotels totaling 600 rooms. Once built, the facility would be purchased and operated by Hyatt. But public officials made it known that they would

not approve the incentives without a "labor peace" agreement in place.

That made the difference in getting the agreement from Hyatt, says UNITE HERE Local 8 organizer Shellea Allen, despite the fact that Hyatt is still the target of a global boycott by UNITE HERE that has the endorsement of the AFL-CIO.

UNITE HERE says it is boycotting Hyatt for underpaying and mistreating its housekeepers, giving them too-heavy workloads and in some cases contracting out their work to temps earning minimum wage. A Chicago Hyatt even turned heat lamps on workers who were picketing during a heat wave.

But under the labor peace agreement in Portland, Hyatt would show a friendlier face. UNITE HERE organizers could meet with workers at the hotel, and hold meetings there; managers would attend and make it clear that the company has no objection to workers exercising their right to unionize. Workers would be free to join a labor organization of their choosing, and could do so through a "card check" process or through a government-administered election. If workers choose to unionize, and don't reach agreement with management within six months over the terms of a first union contract, the contract proposals could be submitted to binding arbitration, under the la-

bor peace agreement.

The agreement does not apply to Hyatt Place at Portland Airport Cascade Station, which is currently nonunion.

The proposed hotel would be located in the Oregon Convention Center urban renewal area, which makes it eligible for help from the PDC. PDC is looking at contributing about \$4.1 million to the project. The proposal is expected to go before the PDC, Portland City Council, and Metro. Metro Council will consider public subsidies at a Dec. 4 work session, and is scheduled to vote on it Dec. 13.

"If Hyatt's going to come here, these have to be good jobs," said Allen, the UNITE HERE organizer. "All jobs

should be living wage jobs, but when public funds are going into it, these *have* to be good jobs."

If the \$200 million project gets approval and is built, it would likely become the fifth unionized hotel in the Portland metropolitan area, joining the Hilton, Benson and Paramount downtown, and the Vancouver Hilton and Convention Center in Washington.

If the workers choose to join UNITE HERE, they would become members of Local 8, headquartered in Seattle. Portland-based Local 9 was merged into Local 8 in August.

USPS hiring freeze hurts veterans, postal workers say

With the US Postal Service (USPS) closed on Veterans Day, a group of Portland postal employees used the day off to say that if USPS really wants to honor veterans, it should hire them.

Hiring has been frozen for five years at USPS, and that's reducing opportunities for veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, said letter carriers and postal workers who gathered at Pioneer Courthouse Square in Portland.

USPS is historically the biggest employer of veterans. USPS applicants take civil service aptitude tests, and veterans get 5 points added to their test scores. Disabled veterans get 10 points. Over 108,000 former service men and women are current employees, about a fifth of USPS workforce. But the average USPS employee is now over 53, and workers aren't being replaced as they retire.

In Oregon there are 180 vacant letter carrier positions, says Kevin Card, state director of the National Association of Letter Carriers, and 114 of those are in the Portland area. At the rally, those missing co-workers were represented by blue USPS shirts hoisted up on picket signs.

And blame for the missing workers, protesters said, belongs to Congress.

"Six years ago, in a lame duck session of Congress, we were saddled with a \$5.5 billion a year pre-funding requirement," Card said. That's the amount USPS is required to pay, in advance, for future health costs of retirees. That would be a very unusual requirement for any employer, and it has pushed USPS — already under stress from declining mail volumes — to the brink of insolvency.

Now, a bill by Darrell Issa would make the situation even worse, Card

said. The bill authorizes USPS to go down to five-day delivery, encourages contracting out, orders USPS to close post offices sufficient to cut cost \$1 billion a year and mail processing facilities to save \$2 billion a year, caps contributions to employee health care, and bars collective bargaining agreements from containing anti-layoff clauses.

Could it pass Senate and White House during the lame duck session that begins Nov. 13? "We don't know, and you gotta be fearful," Card says.

"When it comes right down to it, the working class is being asked to pay the bill."

Marching out of the square, USPS workers passed by the Pioneer Courthouse (former site of a post office), where a man sitting on the sidewalk held a sign: "Disabled veteran. 67 years old. Trying to get by. Anything helps. Happy Veterans Day."



Labor braces for lame-duck session

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI) — Fresh off of a consequential U.S. election that saw union members vote by a 2-to-1 margin to reelect Democratic President Barack Obama and retain a Democratic majority in the U.S. Senate, union leaders started planning future legislative priorities.

But before they could even think about next year and beyond, they had to deal with an immediate problem, sure to be discussed at the AFL-CIO Executive Council's post-election meeting in D.C. on Nov. 9: What to do about the

"lame duck" session of the 112th Congress and the nation's "fiscal cliff" that lawmakers are supposed to avoid.

"Starting tomorrow — Yes, I said tomorrow! — working families will be more out in communities at close to 100 events to talk to members of Congress about the coming lame duck session and fiscal showdown," AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka declared on Nov. 7.

"We will send the message that it's time to say 'no' to benefit cuts for Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid and 'yes' to fair taxes on America's wealthiest 2 percent. It's time to rebuild America's middle class, not tear it down."

If Congress does nothing, a mix of tax hikes — on workers and on the rich — and billions of dollars of cuts in domestic and defense programs are scheduled to kick in starting Jan. 1. They include restoration of the full payroll tax needed to fund Social Security and Medicare.

The economic jolt is so huge that analysts of all political stripes contend it would throw the U.S. back into recession.

Labor agrees. It's pushing to raise taxes on the rich and to create jobs, especially in manufacturing and infrastructure, Trumka said.

"It is time for our nation to move forward and continue the fight for economic and social justice for all Americans," said Amalgamated Transit Union President Larry Hanley in a statement.

But beyond that immediate problem of the fiscal cliff, union leaders say labor has other priorities down the road. Some of them are:

Labor law reform will always be the union movement's Number 1 priority, Trumka said.

Obama promised to sign the Employee Free Choice Act, labor's top legislative priority, during his first term. The measure would have leveled the playing field between workers and bosses in organizing drives and in bargaining, and increased penalties for employer labor law-breaking. But Obama never pushed it, upsetting leaders and members.

AFT President Randi Weingarten and Service Employees Secretary-Trea-

surer Eliseo Medina each placed comprehensive immigration reform, including a path to legal residence — and labor law protection — for undocumented workers high on next year's "to do" list. So did Obama, in an interview with the editors of the Des Moines Register, even before he beat GOP nominee Mitt Romney by 70 to 26 percent among Latino voters, who were a record 11 percent-plus of the electorate.

"Latinos proved we are a national political force and growing stronger with each election cycle," Medina said. "We said, 'Yes!' to comprehensive immigration reform. And we said, 'No!' to scapegoating of immigrants and communities of color. This election proved comprehensive immigration reform is not the third rail of politics."

Medina said he expects passage of comprehensive immigration reform next year.

American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) president J. David Cox expects Obama to propose a pay raise — the first in several years — for federal workers.

DOL helps 400 laid off at Hanford

The U.S. Department of Labor announced a \$1.3 million grant to provide re-employment assistance for about 400 workers affected by layoffs from multiple environmental cleanup contractors — including CH2M HILL Plateau Remediation Co., Materials and Energy Corp., Mission Support Alliance and 13 others — at the U.S. Department of Energy's Hanford Site in Southeastern Washington.

The grant, awarded to the Washington State Employment Security Department, will provide dislocated workers with employment-related assistance, including support services and training, in order to help them re-enter the workforce in growing areas of the economy.

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