

Public Interest Research Groups fundraiser fires entire bargaining team

A manager also threatens to close Portland call center as workers walk out in protest

After 18 months on the phone raising money for consumer and environmental groups, David Neel was fired — by phone — on Election Day. He's the seventh openly pro-union worker fired by the nonprofit Fund for the Public Interest since a union campaign began among its Portland call center employees last fall. Headquartered in Boston, the Fund for the Public Interest is the fundraising arm for state Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) and spinoff groups like Environment Oregon and Environment Colorado. In 2010, the Fund raised \$26.5 million through door-to-door and sidewalk canvasses in 40 states, as well as through phone calls to donors from call centers in Boston, Sacramento and Portland.

Last October, workers at the Fund's Portland call center voted 19-5 to join Communications Workers of America Local 7901 — not because they wanted a pension or even a wage increase, but because they wanted an end to draconian pay and discipline policies. Hourly pay rises 50 cents every 80 hours if workers meet fundraising targets, but

drops up to several dollars when they fail to meet the targets. And workers are fired if they fail to meet a separate benchmark two weeks in a row — regardless of how long they've worked for the Fund.

Pat Wood — who's in charge of the Fund's three call centers — flies to Portland from Boston once a month for negotiations over a first-time union contract. But in over a year of bargaining, the Fund hasn't agreed to any significant changes, and in that time it has fired six members of the union bargaining team — all of the original four (Neel was the last), plus two workers who took the place of fired workers. [Each time a member of the bargaining team is fired, another worker steps forward to take his or her place.]

It's against federal labor law to fire a worker for participating in a labor organization. Local 7901 filed charges protesting the firings, but the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) dismissed the cases, citing a lack of evidence that their union involvement was a factor in the firings. In each case, the Fund said workers were fired for other reasons. Wael Elasady was fired for missing a shift; Kris Humbird was fired for calling in sick too late; Mike Schultz, Keets Nelson, and Cortina Robinson were fired for missing quota two weeks in a row; Ben Woodhouse was fired on accusation of being rude during phone conversations; and David Neel was fired on an accusation that he

submitted false numbers in a phone report. In total, out of a 30-person workplace, the seven most openly pro-union workers — including all but one of the workers who were active in the original effort to unionize — were fired.

Neel disputes the accusation that he submitted false numbers, and says he was given no opportunity to defend himself.

"I knew I had a giant target on my back, but I kept my nose clean," Neel said. "They were looking for a reason to get rid of me for a long time but I hadn't given them one."

Neel was told he was barred from returning to work, and his personal belongings were overnighted.

Wood (the Fund's chief negotiator) declined to be interviewed, and referred questions to the Fund's direct mail associate director, Caitlin Seeley. Seeley asked that questions be submitted via e-mail, and then declined to answer any of them, saying only that "the Fund has been, and will continue to, negotiate with the union in good faith."

But Local 7901 disputes that claim in a charge of bad faith bargaining it filed Nov. 16 after the Fund worsened a previous offer. The NLRB is investigating the charge. The agency also issued a formal complaint against the Fund Sept. 17. The case is scheduled to be heard by a federal administrative law judge Jan. 22. That complaint stems from a June 29 walkout by employees. As workers left the office in protest, Portland call



In the last 13 months, seven union activists have been fired at a 30-employee call center run by the Fund for the Public Interest. The Fund is the fundraising wing of the national PIRG network which includes OSPIRG, CALPIRG and groups like Environment Oregon and Environment Colorado. Above, six of the fired workers join their former co-workers for a Nov. 14 protest walkout. From left: Ben Woodhouse, David Neel, Cortina Robinson, Mike Schultz, Kris Humbird, and Wael Elasady.

center director Referd Raley threatened to permanently close the office and fire everyone.

That's a credible threat. The Fund used to have a call center in Los Angeles, until workers there unionized in 2005. Eleven months later, the Fund closed the doors, and moved the operation to Sacramento.

But Portland call center workers have resolved not to be intimidated. They conducted another job action Nov. 14 in which 22 workers took part — joined by several dozen supporters. A kind of one-shift strike, it consisted of workers walking out, refusing to return,

and picketing the worksite for an hour.

As it happened, Wood was sitting in a nearby cafe, so Local 7901 President Madelyn Elder put together an impromptu delegation. One by one, Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain and Secretary-Treasurer Barbara Byrd, Portland Jobs with Justice Executive Director Margaret Butler, and retired Catholic priest Bob Krueger introduced themselves and urged Wood to settle.

His response to each: "I understand." No further bargaining sessions are expected until January.

Governor nominates unionists to key posts

Gov. John Kitzhaber has submitted the names of 44 appointees to state boards and commissions for confirmation by the Oregon Senate. The Senate Rules Committee will meet at 8 a.m. Dec. 10 in Hearing Room B at the Capitol to consider nominations and hear from first-time appointees. The full Senate will vote on recommendations at 11 a.m. Dec. 12.

Among the nominees from organized labor:

Ken Allen, executive director of Oregon AFSCME Council 75, to the Ore-

gon Health and Science University board of directors.

Michael Rose of Elkton, special representative for the International Association of Machinists, to the Board of Forestry.

Felisa Hagins of Service Employees International Union Local 49, to the Oregon Health Policy Board.

Ben Stange of Monmouth's International Association of Fire Fighters, to a labor seat on the Workers' Compensation Management-Labor Advisory Committee.

Union leaders get tour of Port of Vancouver

VANCOUVER — Nineteen local union presidents and business representatives were welcomed by Port of Vancouver Commissioner Nancy Baker and Executive Director Todd Colman for a Nov. 14 port tour. Colman touted the port's economic benefits to Vancouver, and pointed to multiple construction projects under way that could provide opportunities for union building trades workers, including an expansion of the United Grain export terminal, development of a potash export facility by BHP Billiton, and the multi-stage West Vancouver Freight Access project.

Meanwhile, north of its Columbia River waterfront properties, the Port is working to open up industrial land to development.

Colman said the Port of Vancouver is not interested in pursuing coal exports, because of its potential to interfere with rail access for existing tenants.

The Port is 99.7 percent occupied as of now, with 52 tenants occupying all but 12,000 square feet out of 20 million total. Colman said Port tenants employ 2,300 workers all told.

Baker said she hoped the tour and meet-and-greet will end up becoming an annual occurrence.

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