



Portland mayor-elect Charlie Hales offers solidarity with members of Local 555 who have been bargaining for a new contract since February 2011. Joining him at the podium were members of Oregon's faith and labor communities.

Mayor-elect Hales to grocers: 'NO ONE WINS IN A RACE TO THE BOTTOM'

Portland mayor-elect Charlie Hales and leaders of Oregon's faith and labor communities stood in solidarity with United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 555 at a Dec. 10 press conference called by the union.

At issue was unfinished negotiations between Local 555 and grocery giants Safeway, Albertsons, Fred Meyer (Kroger), and QFC on a new contract for some 14,000 grocery, meat, and central checkout workers in Oregon and Southwest Washington.

The employers are represented at the table by Allied Employers Inc.

The press conference was held at noon — an hour before a scheduled round of bargaining at the airport Holiday Inn.

"My message to these employers is as heartfelt for their success as it is for yours, and it's just this simple — no one wins in a race to the bottom," Hales told the crowd of about 150.

Hales said it is everyone's job to stand up and fight so that hard-working people can realize and live the American dream. "That's why we're here today in solidarity with UFCW."

After 22 months of bargaining,

union officials say grocers haven't budged from their demands to increase out-of-pocket expenses for employee health insurance. Union officials said grocers have proposed increasing the minimum waiting time to receive full health care coverage from 43 months to a minimum of 78 months, while doubling the out-of-pocket annual maximum for family coverage to \$12,000. Employers recently withdrew a proposal to eliminate the five-day work week. They wanted the ability to schedule workers seven days a week without any days off or having to pay overtime.

"Grocery industry jobs were once family-wage jobs. In recent decades the corporate trend of moving more workers to part-time status, cutting benefits, and stagnating wages, have moved many workers from the middle class to the ranks of the working poor," said Local 555 President Day Clay. "We hope today marks the beginning of rebuilding dignity and restoring respect to the grocery industry."

Several union members at the press conference said they know co-workers who rely on food stamps, food banks, and other public assistance to survive.

Local 555 member Jeff White of Klamath Falls said half the union's bargaining unit today works part time, with many qualifying for government assistance.

"The respect we're asking for is that we have enough hours and pay to support our families," White said. "Respect us enough so that we can be a viable part of our community; so that we can be an asset, not a liability."

Local 555 member Nick Dust of Vancouver, Washington, called on his colleagues to stand together and fight for more reliable hours and liveable wages. "Only by standing together can we ensure that no employee has to choose between putting food on the table or getting health care," he said.

Clay said the unionized grocery industry is seeking to follow the Walmart



Sheet Metal Workers Local 16 members, officers & staff wish all workers in Oregon & Washington safe and happy holidays

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business model, which winds up costing taxpayers as more and more workers apply for public subsidies.

"We're not going to let these corporations dump the costs of their business model on our communities," Clay said. "We are no longer going to let that happen in the dark. We are going to shine a light on them."

Hales, who will take office as mayor of Portland on Jan. 1, called on employers to do the right thing.

"In Portland, I think we have a tradition, which I hope that we see during this negotiation on all sides — of doing the right thing for the right reasons, and taking care of everyone. And that's what these employers, in my opinion, have an obligation to do."

At the press conference, more than 150 food boxes, put together by the union and members from various stores, were waiting to be picked up or delivered to members in need.

"These food boxes you see here today, it's not a stunt. It's a reality, and it's a reality that has to end," Clay said.

Mike Marshall, director of collective bargaining for Local 555, said that while the employers moved some on language issues during talks Dec. 10-12, they made no movement in economics, including employee health benefits. The next round of bargaining is set for Jan. 14-15.

This is the first time in Local 555's history that contracts from each geographic region within its jurisdiction — from Klamath Falls, Oregon, to Longview, Washington — are being bargained simultaneously. It's known as Unity Bargaining, and it brings together about 60 union members from each of the regions sitting at the same bargaining table.



Grocery workers receive food boxes put together by union members at various stores throughout the state. Half of the union's bargaining unit works part time, and many qualify for government assistance.



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