



Portland's SAG-AFTRA office closed May 31, though not without a sendoff party. Above, national union board member Mary McDonald-Lewis greets friends, like Broccoliman, who dropped by to say farewell.

SAG-AFTRA closes Oregon office amid mass protest

Business and governor to union: 'Don't go!'

The union representing performers in film, television, radio, and music closed its Portland office May 31, though not without protest. Last year, the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists merged to become 165,000-member SAG-AFTRA. On April 20, 2013, the merged union's national board approved the closure of 13 local offices around the country, and the lay-off of 60 staff.

But Oregon SAG-AFTRA leaders waged a campaign to keep the Portland office open. Arguing that closure was a mistake, given the growth of Portland and Oregon as a media market, they filled a Facebook page with letters and YouTube testimonials from local actors, and even garnered letters of support from a producer association and from Gov. John Kitzhaber.

Without a local office, SAG-AFTRA will lose relevance in the market, Oregon Media Production Association Executive Director Tom McFadden told SAG-AFTRA national Executive Director David White in a May 7 letter.

Kitzhaber, in a May 28 letter to White, said he would normally not engage in discussions of internal union operations such as the location of local union offices. "However," he continued, "your union's presence in this state is an economic asset for Oregon, and closing this office is as problematic for Oregon as would be the loss of any business."

Kitzhaber wrote the letter after running into Mary McDonald-Lewis in the state Capitol. McDonald-Lewis — SAG-AFTRA's co-national board member representing Portland — is a voice actor who had voiced Kitzhaber's election campaign ads.

McDonald-Lewis campaigned fiercely against the office closure, collecting over 700 signatures on an online petition asking the board not to approve

it. But the union budget, which included the office closures, passed by about two-to-one, she said, with board members from Los Angeles and New York voting for it, while those from smaller media markets voted "no."

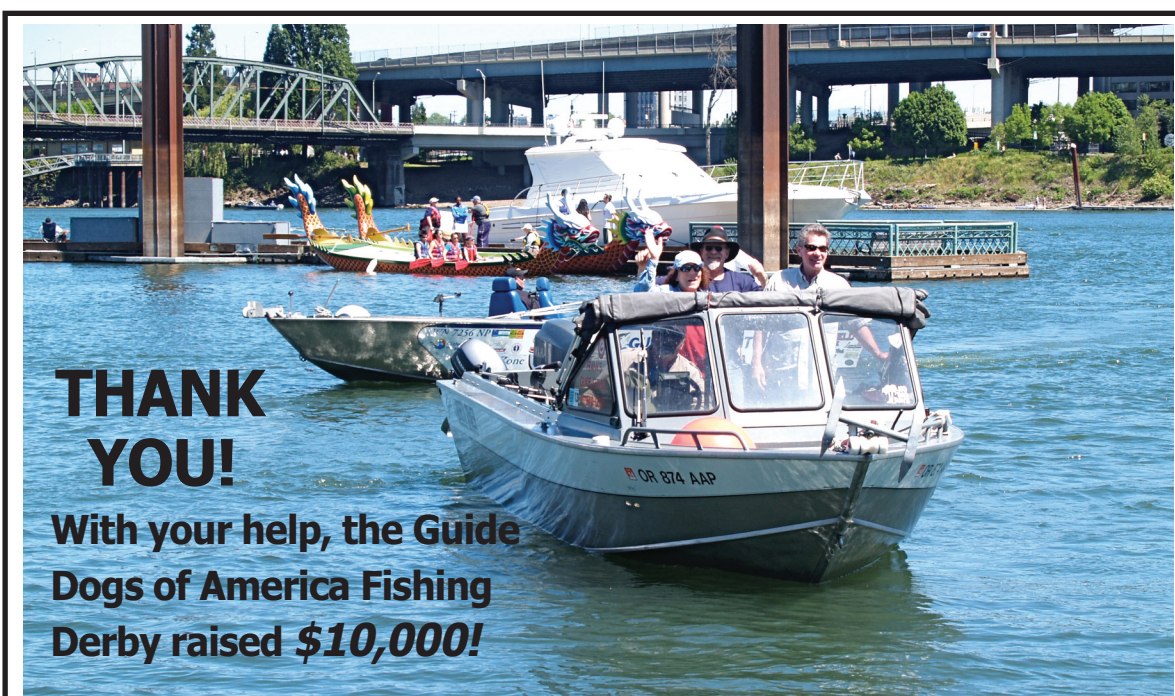
"Though we make our living performing, singing, dancing, and reporting, we are at the end of the day labor union members and members of the working class," McDonald-Lewis told the Labor Press. "We need the same protections of wages and working conditions that any other union member requires."

McDonald-Lewis said the Portland office served over 700 members, predominantly actors, but also radio and television personalities. Going forward, Oregon members will be represented by staff in other SAG-AFTRA offices, including Seattle. Besides Portland, the offices being closed cover Houston-Austin, Twin Cities, San Diego, Nevada, Arizona-Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and New Orleans.

On the Portland office's final day, when national staff showed up to oversee changing the locks, they were met by McDonald-Lewis and a contingent of union members. McDonald-Lewis told them that — in defiance of a national leadership order for a 5 p.m. closure — local union members planned to have a proper sendoff party for local Executive Director Nathaniel Applefield. Applefield, a campaign operative and former state field director for now-U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, had run AFTRA's local office since 2011.

That night, with painted-on "solidarity sideburns" to mimic Applefield's look, SAG-AFTRA members said their good-byes. With labor ballads from the band General Strike, the sendoff party was live-streamed on the Internet.

The Oregon AFL-CIO has offered use of its Oregon Labor Center meeting hall in Portland, SAG-AFTRA Vice President Michelle Marian said, if members want to continue to congregate.

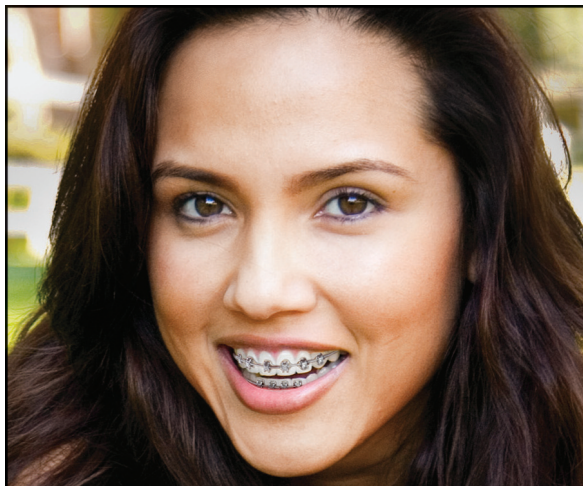


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