

# Oregon University System getting tough with unions

Union leaders say the Oregon University System (OUS) is getting tough at the table in labor negotiations this year. In contract talks with Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 503, the seven-university system is seeking concessions on grievance procedure, seniority, overtime, and contracting out — all while proposing to shift health care costs to workers and offering wage increases at less than the rate of inflation. Local 503 represents a 4,200-member unit of facilities, IT, clerical and other support workers.

The talk has a similar tenor in bargaining between Portland State University (PSU) and American Association of University Professors (AAUP), which represents 1,200 full-time faculty there.

On May 16, about 175 union members rallied at downtown Portland's Ira Keller Park, and criticized PSU for lavish administrator salaries — and for exploiting Vietnamese immigrant workers at an on-campus hotel.

Willamette Week reported May 8 that managers at University Place Hotel hired relatives, stole tips, made workers pay kickbacks, and pocketed wages paid to “ghost employees” on the payroll. Marc Nisenfeld, SEIU's PSU chapter president, says the union learned about those abuses in March and immediately notified the university

vice president — but said nearly two months later the university had done nothing substantive. Yet a day after getting a call from Willamette Week, PSU fired the hotel's general manager and an assistant.

A handful of the wronged hotel workers attended the union rally, and two — Dui Do and Hua Le — joined a delegation to the office of PSU president Wim Wiewel.

## HIGH LIFE FOR EXECs, BELT-TIGHTENING FOR WORKERS

Picket signs at the rally called attention to Wiewel making \$500,000 a year. In fact, his compensation is higher than that — \$512,786. Wiewel also lives rent-free at a university-owned mansion in Dunthorpe, which is cleaned twice weekly by the same workers who clean the hotel.

But times must remain lean for workers, apparently. In the talks with SEIU, OUS is proposing no general wage increase at all for the first year, a 1 percent raise the second year, and 1 percent the final month of the two-year contract. OUS also proposes to double workers' share of the health insurance premium, to 10 percent, and cap its liability for paying premium increases at 5 percent a year; workers would pay

100 percent of any premium increase above that.

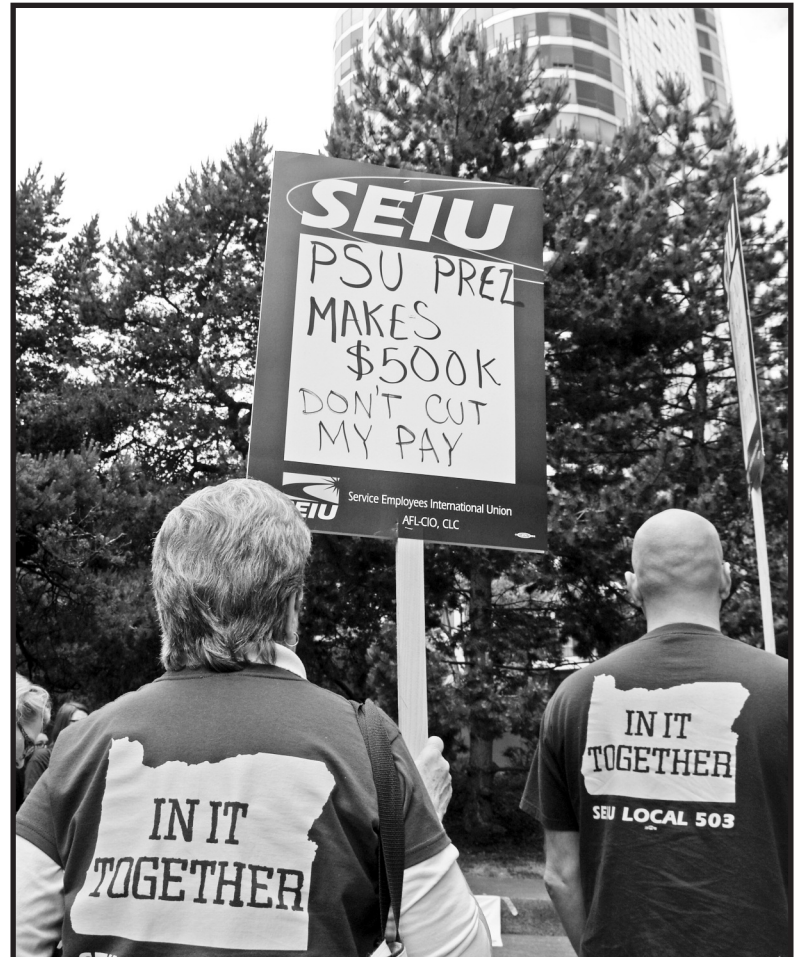
The union counter-proposal is a 2 percent raise each year, plus annual cost-of-living increases tied to the Consumer Price Index.

Scott Gallagher, PSU director of communications, wouldn't comment on specifics of bargaining, but said lack of state support makes bargaining a challenge. PSU, for example, has 10,000 more students than it did in 1995, but gets less money from the state than it did back then.

OUS is also proposing to eliminate overtime pay after eight hours, get rid of a requirement to do a feasibility study before contracting out union member work, and end layoff “bumping rights” for senior workers.

“The proposal on contracting out and bumping (seniority rights) go against the basic tenets of the union,” Nisenfeld told the Labor Press.

For its part, SEIU wants a wage floor of \$2,498 a month — the dollar amount that would keep a family of four off food stamps. To that, OUS agreed, in steps: It wants to give its lowest paid employees raises bringing them half way to that level in the middle of the two-year contract, and a second set of raises to reach the floor on the last day of the contract.



“PSU prez makes \$500k” says the SEIU Local 503 picket sign. Actually, it's \$512,786, and he lives free-of-charge in a university mansion, landscaped and cleaned at university expense. Union members rallied May 16 to say they're tired of higher ed bargaining that asks workers to sacrifice.

## TUITION UP, STATE SUPPORT DOWN

OUS takeaway demands from its unions come even as the state university system seeks another 5 percent tuition increase from students. In recent decades, tuition has risen as Oregon has reduced its investment in the university system. State appropriations now make up less than 13 percent of the budget of the state university system, and Oregon ranks 44th in the nation for its per capita contribution to higher education.

An April 2013 audit of OUS by the Oregon Secretary of State's office found that adjusted for inflation, tuition rose 61 percent between 2001 and 2012, at the same time state support dropped from about \$470 million a year to about \$339 million. During that time period, the faculty-to-student ratio fell from 1:25 to 1:27. And the portion of that state funding that services construction project debt more than quadrupled, from 3 percent to 13 percent.

Undergraduate full-time tuition is \$7,653 at PSU this year, a figure that doesn't include fees, books, and living expenses. Some 64 percent of PSU students who left school in 2011 had student debt, with balances averaging \$26,287.

In contract negotiations, SEIU is proposing that tuition increases be limited to 5 percent a year, one of several “common good” proposals that are unusual in a collective bargaining context. SEIU is also proposing that no OUS employee take a pay or benefit cut until

the state of Oregon investigates bank fraud and takes steps to recover money lost by pension funds to the LIBOR scandal.

The current contract expires June 30. Bargaining was next scheduled for June 6-7 in Eugene.

## Strike at Evergreen shuts down college

OLYMPIA — A strike by the Student Support Services Staff Union at The Evergreen State College virtually shut down the college May 28.

The bargaining unit of 57 counselors, advisers, resident directors, and others voted May 15 by a 90 percent margin to authorize job actions up to and including strike action. Bargaining on the first contract began 16 months ago. The workers are members of the Washington Federation of State Employees (WFSE), an affiliate of AF-SCME Council 28.

The strike started shortly after 5 a.m. after six days of mediation failed to resolve differences over just-cause due process rights and a fair compensation package.

“We have shut down Evergreen for the day,” said Evergreen Professor Larry Mosqueda at a mid-day strike rally at the entrance to the college's Red Square.

An estimated 300 picketers from WFSE, other unions, students, and allies walked the picket line in solidarity.

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