

SEIU #503 prepares to strike at 7 Oregon universities

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 503 is laying the groundwork for a strike at the Oregon University System (OUS). Local 503 represents 4,200 support workers at the system's seven state universities, including facilities, IT, and clerical workers. After six months of bargaining failed to produce a new contract, Local 503 declared impasse Aug. 19. Now the union is collecting member signatures on a strike pledge petition, scheduling strike authorization votes around the state, and calling on faculty and students to sign a pledge not to cross strike picket lines.

Wages are a key sticking point. OUS is proposing across-the-board increases of 1.5 percent on Dec. 1, 2013, and 2 percent a year later. The union is seeking 2.5 percent retroactive to the July 1, 2013, expiration of the previous two-year contract, and another 2.5 percent July 1, 2014. Local 503 is also proposing that the across-the-board raises be a minimum of \$75 per month, thus bringing the lowest-paid workers up more.

The two sides also disagree on "step" increases that reward workers for sticking around. Under the previous contract, workers get a raise of about 4.75 percent a year until they reach the



(ABOVE LEFT) Ethan Picman, a Portland State University worker and SEIU Local 503 chief steward (on bullhorn), leads a chant among supporters at an Aug. 28 rally. Local 503 represents support workers at seven state universities, and they're voting on whether to authorize a strike. (ABOVE RIGHT) United Steelworkers union activists from locals in Pennsylvania and Illinois made a Portland stop Aug. 28 on a 13-city coast-to-coast "Summer of



Solidarity" tour aimed at connecting local struggles with a broader fight against corporate power. In Portland, they rallied with SEIU Local 503 members trying to get a contract at the Oregon University System, and visited the picket line of members of International Longshore and Warehouse Union who are locked out from several local grain export terminals.

top of the pay scale after nine years. OUS is proposing to divide those step increases further, giving only half a step increase each year.

OUS dropped several demands that earlier had provoked union members, including a proposal to eliminate the right of more senior workers to "bump"

less senior workers in the event of lay-off. OUS also backed off a proposal to stop paying at the overtime rate for work beyond eight hours in a day.

But OUS also backtracked from its earlier willingness to meet the union half-way on a "wage floor" proposal. Local 503 is proposing that no worker

be paid less than \$2,498 a month — the dollar threshold at which a family of four becomes eligible for food stamps.

The two sides agree on health benefits, for the most part, including that employees would pay 5 percent of the premium. But OUS has balked at SEIU's proposal that employees with domestic partners be reimbursed for the federal health benefit tax they must pay. The IRS treats employer-provided spousal health coverage as a tax-free benefit, but makes employees pay a tax on the same benefit when it covers a same-sex or opposite-sex domestic partner. SEIU views its proposal as a civil rights issue.

Despite the declaration of impasse, the two sides met Aug. 26 with the help of a mediator, and are set to meet again Sept. 13 and 14 in Corvallis. Bargaining sessions rotate around the state's seven campuses, and SEIU has organized rallies outside each bargaining session.

On Aug. 28 it held another rally — after receiving an offer of solidarity from a group of Steelworkers traveling the United States in a "summer solidarity tour." About 100 union members and supporters, plus the Steelworkers, assembled in Portland State University (PSU)'s Urban Plaza. Several unfurled a 20-foot "Fair Contract Now" banner from the top of an adjacent building. But when union members brought their noisy protest to the nearby state chancellor's office, they found a locked door. OUS lead negotiator Brian Caulfield greeted them outside the office, and accepted their letter to the chancellor. Demonstrators next visited the office of PSU president Wim Wiewel, but were told he was out to lunch.

Wiewel — who lives rent-free in a university mansion and receives \$512,786 a year in compensation — wrote to university employees in August, announcing a badge that entitles them to attend 20 PSU sporting events for free.

"I'd much rather have a living wage," Local 503 member Lora Worden told the Labor Press. Worden said

she earns \$11.82 an hour doing data support at PSU's Graduate School of Education ... and has \$90,000 in student debt to repay for her bachelor's and master's degrees. She's one of an estimated 1,200 workers who would see wages rise substantially if the Oregon University System agrees to the proposed wage floor.

Strike authorization ballots will be counted Sept. 11. If members authorize it, they could strike as early as Sept. 23, after a mandated 10-day notice. Fall term classes begin Sept. 30. Local 503 is asking students and faculty to commit via a web site, inittogether4ous.org, that if there's a strike, they will honor strike picket lines by joining picket lines and campus rallies, refusing to patronize campus services, and canceling or skipping classes or holding classes on the picket lines.

TriMet driver aids injured bicyclist

Nancy Cain, a member of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757, may have saved a life Aug. 16 in the course of her job as a TriMet bus driver.

Late that night, Cain was driving the last Number 56 bus of the evening westbound on Southwest Barbur Boulevard when she noticed a crumpled bike on the side of the road — and a man lying in the bike lane. Cain secured the bus, hopped out to check on the man, and then called a TriMet dispatcher, who sent an ambulance. Four passengers got out and helped collect his belongings.

The bicyclist was Henry Schmidt, a student at Lewis & Clark College who had been on his way home from work at Pok Pok restaurant when he was hit by a driver who left the scene. Schmidt told TV reporters he's grateful that Cain came to his aid, and credited her with saving his life as he lay in the road.

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