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Parkrose decides not to contract out bus drivers

An energetic five-month campaign by OSEA saves school bus driver jobs

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In a dramatic turnaround, Parkrose School Board rejected its superintendent's plan to contract out school bus transportation to a private corporation, First Student. The 3-to-2 vote took place at 10 p.m., three-plus hours into the board's Feb. 24 meeting, as a packed house of Oregon School Employees Association (OSEA) members and supporters watched.

The district — located in outer Northeast Portland — announced its intention to outsource student transportation last September. It then paid for a state-mandated cost comparison, and received bids from four companies. Superintendent Karen Gray proposed

to award the contract to UK-headquartered First Student, sell the district's bus fleet for \$350,000, and lay off district school bus employees at the end of the school year. Though the district estimated the move would save money, the cost comparison indicated nearly all the savings would come from cutting employee retirement and health benefits.

But OSEA waged a vigorous campaign to defend the jobs of its 22 members — drivers, a dispatcher and a mechanic. Rallying behind the slogan "Keep It Local," the union blanketed the district with lawn signs, and went door to door to talk to residents. It even aired a television ad featuring a mom and her daughter — touting the value of the district directly controlling its "first classroom of the day."

For months, OSEA rallied outside board meetings, mobilizing members and residents to attend. Board members got calls from dozens of residents, and from state legislators representing the Parkrose district — State Rep. Jessica Vega Pederson and State Sen. Michael



OSEA holds its final anti-outsourcing protest before the Feb. 24 Parkrose School Board meeting. In a 3-2 vote, the Board kept school bus drivers as district employees.

Dembrow — all opposed to the plan. The anticipated savings were said to be intended to hire more teachers, but the Parkrose teachers union also stood with OSEA in opposing the outsourcing. On the day of the big vote, board members got a letter opposing outsourcing from

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'Right-to-work' initiative dropped

SALEM — Sponsors of two anti-union initiative petitions — including a so-called right-to-work measure for public employees — have agreed to withdraw their measures aimed at the Oregon ballot in November. In exchange, a labor-backed coalition that sponsored pro-union counter-measures agreed to do the same.

The announcement was made March 3 by Gov. John Kitzhaber.

In all, 13 measures were withdrawn. Most of them were still waiting to be certified by the secretary of state. The right-to-work measure, Initiative Petition 9, had been certified and was in the early stages of collecting signatures. None of the measures had qualified for the ballot.

The governor's announcement follows an agreement Kitzhaber brokered in February between the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and many of the state's largest hospitals. Following that agreement, an additional five ballot initiative petitions

were withdrawn.

Kitzhaber, who is up for re-election this year, has talked for more than a year about wanting to keep the initiatives off the ballot in order to avoid a bruising, expensive ballot measure battle. He began formal discussions with initiative sponsors several months ago.

"This is an unprecedented moment in Oregon's long history of ballot measure politics," Kitzhaber said in a press release. "Over the last three years, we have shown time and time again that no matter how wide the ideological divide might be, people on different sides of issues are able to come together for the greater good of Oregon and our citizens."

At press time, the secretary of state's website showed the following anti-union initiative petitions had been withdrawn: IP 1 (public employees cannot contribute to unions using payroll deductions if funds are used for political purposes), and IP 9 (dubbed the "Pub-

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PHOTO COURTESY OF IBEW LOCAL 659.

Medford teachers end 16-day strike

MEDFORD — Over 500 Medford school teachers went back to work Feb. 24, ending a 16-day strike with a tentative agreement on a new three-year contract that both sides compromised to achieve.

Medford Education Association members voted Feb. 27 to ratify the agreement. It includes cost-of-living wage increases of 1.9, 2.5 and 3 percent, plus a 2.1 percent salary increase to add back four work days. But some of those gains will be eaten up when teachers' contribution to health insurance doubles from 5 percent of the premium to 10 percent by the end of the contract. The union also agreed to phase out the current early retirement health insurance benefit. Teachers who retire this year and next can stay on the system's health insurance plan until they are eligible for Medicare.

Schools closed the first three days of the strike, idling 12,100 students. But the district hired more than 165

substitute teachers, and reopened some schools Feb. 9 on half-day schedules with what even the Medford Mail Tribune newspaper called "dumbed down class selections." Schools were surrounded by picketing teachers and security guards, and students stayed away. Attendance dropped from 68 percent the first day to 44 percent by the end of the strike.

The Medford School District said it does not plan to add days to the school year to make up for lost instructional time during the strike.

Striking teachers were supported by many parents during the strike, which raised the profile of unions in an area of Oregon where they have been less prominent. A Feb. 15 community solidarity rally organized by Southern Oregon Jobs With Justice drew an estimated 600 participants — more than any Medford demonstration in recent memory. And other labor organizations stepped up in solidarity, including In-

ternational Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), Service Employees, American Postal Workers Union, Oregon Nurses Association, United Food and Commercial Workers, AFSCME, Southern Oregon Jobs With Justice, and the Oregon AFL-CIO community coalition Oregon Strong Voice.

With the support of IBEW Local 659 Business Manager Lennie Ellis, two staff members joined teachers on the picket line with food and helped organize a community support phone bank. IBEW Local 1245 in Vacaville, California, sent two "organizer stewards" to help with strike support for a week.

"We felt like the community got behind it," said Local 659 organizer John Hutter. "The strike was unfortunate, but it was a great community builder for us and for the teachers. All 600 of them know who we are now, and some of them asked us 'What can we do to help you when the time comes?'"