

CWA gets bare-bones contract with Fund for the Public Interest

Workers at a Portland call center run by the Fund for the Public Interest finally have a union contract — two years and four months after joining Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 7901.

Fund for the Public Interest, headquartered in Boston, runs street, door-to-door and telephone fundraising for state “public interest research groups” like OSPIRG and a spinoff network of state environmental groups like Environment Oregon. It also has contracts to do fundraising for groups like Human Rights Campaign.

In spite of those groups’ progressive reputation, the Fund is an abusive employer, churning through and terminating personnel at a prodigious rate. That’s what prompted its Portland call center workers to unionize, but the Fund didn’t stop being an abusive employer just because federal law told it to bargain in good faith with employees.

In fact, CWA contended in charges filed with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), managers used the Fund’s existing draconian rules to eliminate union supporters one after another — firing them for trivial offenses, or more commonly for missing fundraising quotas. The Fund fired the worker who first called the union, all eight of the workers who presented the original union petition to a manager, all four workers who volunteered on the union’s initial bargaining team, and several who replaced them, for a total of at least 13 supporters fired — in a call center that employs about 25. But as thousands of American workers have learned, the NLRB is a toothless bureaucracy when it comes to stopping employers from firing union activists.

Proving a worker was fired for supporting a union isn’t easy. CWA filed multiple charges protesting the firings, but only one charge went anywhere: Af-

ter an August 2013 hearing, a federal administrative law judge ordered that fired union activist David Neel be reinstated with back pay. The Fund appealed the judge’s order, and offered to reinstate Neel pending resolution of the appeal. But the Fund also told Neel he’d be terminated if the Fund won its appeal. That wasn’t the unconditional reinstatement offer CWA believed the judge ordered. Neel, who now does similar fundraising work for the Oregon Working Families Party, declined to accept, holding out for an unconditional offer in the event he wins the appeal, which is still pending.

The Fund may have thought the union effort would peter out, but it didn’t. When union supporters were fired, their pro-union coworkers waged short strikes to protest — and trained and oriented new hires. CWA Local 7901 President Madelyn Elder said a pro-management employee tried to circulate a



Current and former workers at Fund for the Public Interest Portland call center staged a short strike and protest Oct. 11, 2013, the two-year anniversary of their vote to unionize. Protesters marched outside the headquarters of OSPIRG, one of the nonprofit groups that the call center workers raise money for.

State to include apprenticeships in education goals

SALEM — The Oregon Legislature has amended the state’s 40-40-20 Education Plan to include state-registered apprenticeships.

The plan sets a goal to ensure all Oregonians have a high school diploma or equivalent by 2025, and that the vast majority have some form of degree or certificate beyond a high school education. The goal is that 40 percent will have a bachelor’s degree or higher, 40 percent will earn an associate’s degree or post-secondary credential, and 20 percent will have a high school diploma or equivalent.

The legislative and rule-making intent was to include non-college education programs in the “middle 40” of the goal, but it wasn’t clear what programs

were included.

At the Oregon AFL-CIO convention in Bend last September, delegates passed a resolution directing the state labor federation to pursue legislation that would ensure that apprenticeship training was part of the “middle 40.”

It just so happened that then-state Rep. Michael Dembrow (D-Portland) was a delegate at the convention. Dembrow is a community college instructor and member of the American Federation of Teachers.

Dembrow, now a state senator, talked up the resolution to his colleagues. State Rep. Chris Gorcek (D-Troutdale), a community college instructor representing a district with many apprenticeship training centers in

it, took interest in the idea and approached the Oregon AFL-CIO about drafting a bill.

House Bill 4058 made clear that apprenticeship programs registered with the State Apprenticeship and Training Council were to be included as a post-secondary credential.

The bill passed in the House 59-0, and passed in the Senate 29-0.

“By explicitly including registered apprenticeship programs in our education goals, we are ensuring that no matter how students learn, they know there is a path for them after high school into a good career — be it through college or an apprenticeship program,” said Tom Chamberlain, president of the Oregon AFL-CIO.

petition to dump the union, but no coworkers would sign.

But contract negotiations consisted of stonewalling. Telephone fundraising director Pat Wood flew out to Portland once a month from Boston, and said “no” to union proposals, even those as trivial as automatic payroll deduction. Over the course of two years of negotiations, the Fund refused to agree to the most basic union contract rights, such as not disciplining workers without “just cause,” or the requirement that represented employees pay union dues.

But in February, the Fund dropped its hard line on the requirement to pay union dues, and that was enough. What made the difference, Elder thinks, was union pressure on the Human Rights Campaign, a gay civil rights group, to switch its fundraising to another contractor. Elder said once that became a real possibility, the Fund settled.

Call center workers ratified a new four-year agreement Feb. 25 in a unanimous vote. The contract contains no

raises or additional benefits, but it codifies existing workplace policies, and addresses worker concerns about pay instability and job security by limiting performance-based pay cuts to \$2 an hour per pay period, and giving workers a third missed-quota week, once a year, before being terminated. Elder said that saved one worker’s job right off the bat.

The contract contains a grievance procedure consisting of appeals up through four levels of the Fund chain of command. But unlike most union contracts, there’s no provision for resolving grievances through binding arbitration. But Elder said that means workers retain the right to strike if a grievance isn’t resolved to their satisfaction; most union contracts bar workers from striking during the term of the contract.

The CWA-Fund contract runs through February 2018. It covers the Fund’s Portland call center workers, but not its thousands of canvass employees or its call center workers in Sacramento and Boston.

Boeing announces plan to build 777X wing in Everett

EVERETT, Wash. — Boeing Co. announced Feb. 18 that it will construct a 1-million-square-foot factory in Everett to build the 777X carbon composite wing. The company confirmed, too, that the airplane will be assembled in Everett, though it didn’t say where.

“This isn’t just a five-year decision or a 20-year decision, this is a 50-year decision,” said Boeing CEO Ray Conner at a press conference with Gov. Jay Inslee, U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, local politicians, and International Association of Machinists Aerospace Coordinator Mark Johnson.

The Machinists Union represents approximately 31,000 manufacturing workers at Boeing plants in Everett, Portland, and Wichita, Kansas. They are members of Machinists District Lodge 751, Machinists District Lodge W24 (Lodge 63), and District Lodge 70.

Conner and the other elected officials praised union members for approving a controversial concessionary contract extension through 2024.

Boeing had threatened to leave Washington if the Machinists didn’t agree to the contract extension and if lawmakers didn’t agree to extend tax breaks for the Fortune 500 company.

Many union members thought the company was bluffing. After all, plane production, stock prices and profits were at all-time highs. And they still had more than two years remaining on their existing collective bargaining agreement.

Lawmakers responded quickly. In a special session called by Gov. Inslee, the Washington Legislature passed a bill giving Boeing \$8.7 billion in extended tax breaks over the next 16 years. It also passed new laws that expedited the permitting process for

777X-related construction. It was the largest state subsidy for a corporation in U.S. history.

The Machinists weren’t so easy.

A week after the Legislature handed Boeing the huge tax break, workers rejected Boeing’s contract proposal by a nearly 2-to-1 margin. The offer included ending the defined benefit pension plan and paying more out-of-pocket for health insurance.

Shortly after the vote, Boeing put out a request for proposal (RFP) and received offers from 22 states to build the new 777X. The RFP whipped federal, state and local politicians into near-hysteria, as they feared the loss of thousands of family-wage jobs in the state. Politicians pleaded with the union to go back to the table and make a deal.

They got the attention of Machinists international union. Union officials returned to the bargaining table, got a

slightly better deal (though it still ended the pension plan and increased health insurance co-pays), and ordered a vote — all against the wishes of the leadership of District Lodge 751.

With pressure to ratify the contract coming from the governor, area mayors, elected officials, and the media, Machinists on Jan. 3 passed the contract extension by fewer than 600 votes.

“The Machinists made a very difficult decision,” Inslee said. “We owe respect to the Machinists for making a decision that helps the entire economy of the state of Washington.”

In a post-ratification-vote interview with the Puget Sound Business Journal, Machinists International President Tom Buffenbarger said he was convinced that Washington was not on Boeing’s final list of sites for the 777X, and that the company might have moved Air Force tanker production to Long

Beach, Calif., had the contract extension been nixed.

“I did have a fear of it leaving Seattle because of the domino effect,” Buffenbarger told the Business Journal. “All of these (disputed contract provisions) mean nothing if Boeing built the plant somewhere else, because people wouldn’t have had a job.”

Conner wouldn’t say how many new jobs will be created, but the Seattle Times reported that during the 777X site-selection competition, Boeing projected the high-tech wing facility alone would provide 2,760 jobs at peak employment in 2024.

At the Feb. 18 press conference, Conner said “We’re going to be here. We’re going to start tearing down buildings, and we’re going to start pumping hundreds of millions of dollars into this area.”