

# UFCW Local 555 emerging as a political force in Oregon

By **DON McINTOSH**  
Associate Editor

Oregon's largest private sector union has worked to build up its political muscle in recent years, after years of punching below its weight. The union, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 555, represents 19,000 workers in Oregon and Southwest Washington, most at chain grocery stores like Fred Meyer, Safeway, Albertsons, and QFC.

Secretary-treasurer Jeff Anderson says Local 555 used to stick to negotiating and enforcing collective bargaining agreements, and didn't see politics as central to its mission. But after his 2008 election to union leadership — on a slate with president Dan Clay — Local 555 worked to increase political engagement in order to win through legislation what it had trouble gaining in contract bargaining.

Member donations to the Active Ballot Club (ABC) — UFCW's political action committee — totaled \$329 a month when Anderson and Clay took office. Today, Anderson says Local 555 members contribute over \$30,000 a month, all of it in voluntary contributions of as little as a \$1 a week from roughly 6,800 members. That's on top of a 50-cent per member per month assessment that pays for political education efforts among union members. The surge won recognition from Local 555's parent union as Local 555 became one of its top five most politically active locals. Cash and in-kind contributions by Local 555 to Oregon political campaigns totaled close to \$380,000 this year.

Local 555 has put its war chest to work in distinctive ways, and has had a string of successes.

It was the only union to back marijuana legalization in a big way, contributing \$75,000 to the successful campaign to pass Oregon's Ballot Measure 91. That's in sync with UFCW's national policy of support for opening up (and unionizing) new hemp and cannabis industries.

Though Local 555 isn't affiliated with the Oregon AFL-CIO, it's active in local AFL-CIO affiliated central labor councils, and it's big supporter of a union-led minor political party, the Oregon Working Families Party. The Working Families Party's door-to-door canvass is a key part of Local 555's political effort. In two hard-fought but successful paid sick leave campaigns, the canvass, backed by funds from Local 555, helped mobilize public support.

For years, Local 555 had tried to negotiate "first day" sick leave into its grocery contracts — which offer paid sick leave only after workers have been out for two days. But it was unable to wrest that concession from giant corporations like Kroger — in a low-profit-margin industry with low-cost nonunion competition like Walmart. So when an August 2012 poll commissioned by Local 555 showed strong support among Portland voters for paid sick leave, union leaders sensed it was possible that a community coalition could win politically — for all workers — what Local 555's employers had refused. Local 555

backed Charlie Hales for mayor, and Amanda Fritz for commissioner. Both won election in November 2012. The following March, the Fritz-sponsored ordinance passed unanimously, making Portland the fourth local jurisdiction in the United States to require paid sick leave. Eugene passed a similar ordinance in July 2014.

And in the February 2014 short session of Oregon Legislature, Local 555 won another reform important to its members: After many years of trying, it got a law passed that ended criminal penalties against cashiers for mistakenly selling alcohol to minors, replacing it with civil fines instead.

Local 555 has pursued unconventional electoral approaches, like backing long-shot candidates in areas of the state not traditionally favorable for pro-union candidates. It's a strategy suited to Local 555's geographically diverse rank-and-file: About half of its 17,000 Oregon members are in less populous areas of the state.

"I'm sick of being on defense," Anderson told the Labor Press. "I want to take our organizations and go on offense."

This election cycle, Local 555 went after the two most iconic tea party candidates for Oregon Legislature.

When conservative talk radio host Bill Post ran for the House District 25 (Newberg/Keizer) seat vacated by Kim Thatcher, Local 555 gave heavy support to Independent candidate Chuck Lee. The Working Families Party canvassed over 17,000 doors in the district,

and Local 555 contributed \$50,000 in cash and close to \$30,000 in-kind contributions. In the end, Post won with nearly 55 percent of the vote.

In House District 23 (Dallas), Local 555 defended incumbent Republican Jim Thompson against a primary challenge from far-right conservative Mike Nearman. After Thompson lost, Local 555 backed Democrat Wanda Davis to the tune of \$15,000. Nearman won with close to 52 percent to 37 percent for Davis.

"We wrestled with the tail of the

tiger," Anderson said. "They won, but strategically, we won, because all this money that would have gone elsewhere came in to defend the two Tea Party candidates."

Anderson said taking the fight to new territory led anti-union funders to spend heavily to clinch the two races. Over \$230,000 was spent to elect Post, and just under \$200,000 to elect Nearman.

"We believe that taking our message to the red counties, in a populist environment, can win."



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