



NORTHWEST LABOR PRESS

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VOLUME 116, NUMBER 4

PORTLAND, OREGON

FEBRUARY 20, 2015

PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

First Unitarian recognizes a union

Church leaders balk at first, but pressure from the congregation prompts a change of heart

By Don McIntosh
Associate editor

Senior minister Bill Sinkford was more than a little surprised Nov. 18, when 11 of his employees at First Unitarian Church of Portland entered his office to present signatures demanding union recognition.

First Unitarian is one of Portland's most progressive churches, with an activist congregation and a profusion of committees on social, economic, and environmental justice. Its parent organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, teaches that evil originates with "unjust social and economic conditions."

But when church employees announced their plan to tackle unjust economic conditions by signing up with Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 7901, they got a chilly response from Sinkford and two other church executives: Minister Tom Disrud and Administrator Kathryn Estey.



Jason Chapman, Nicole Bowmer, Josh Mong and Kate Fagerholm fell in love with their jobs at First Unitarian Church of Portland, but were shaken last November when their efforts to unionize were opposed. Fagerholm left her job at the church as of Feb. 6. Church leaders did an about face the next day, and agreed to recognize the union.

The day after the delegation went to Sinkford's office, then-Local 7901 president Madelyn Elder got a phone call from Corbett Gordon — a member of the First Unitarian congregation who's also a management-side attorney at Tonkon Torp law firm. Gordon told Elder that U.S. labor law doesn't require churches to bargain with unions, and First Unitarian wouldn't be recognizing Local 7901.

But that response missed the point, says labor attorney Cathy Hight, who advised the Unitarian workers. "The whole point of this exemption is to allow churches to organize their labor relations in accord with church doctrine," Hight told the Labor Press. Just because churches don't have to recognize a union doesn't mean they can't. Clerical employees at

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John Kitzhaber resigns amid 'media frenzy'

John Kitzhaber's Feb. 13 resignation as Oregon governor generated expressions of sympathy from top labor leaders, who have looked on him as an ally.

The resignation followed a decision by the state attorney general to open a criminal investigation into whether paid advocacy work by Kitzhaber's fiancée Cylvia Hayes crossed legal lines.

"I am confident that I have not broken any laws nor taken any actions that were dishonest or dishonorable in their intent or outcome," Kitzhaber said at the press conference announcing his resignation. But Kitzhaber said he was troubled that a person can be "charged, tried, convicted and sentenced by the media with no due process and no independent verification of the allegations involved." An "escalating media frenzy" had "reached the point of no return," Kitzhaber said, and he became a liability to the cause.

Kitzhaber included efforts to defend workers' union rights among his proudest achievements: "We have stood by our working men and women steadfastly supporting collective bargaining and

the right to form a union," he said.

"If you look at what he's accomplished in the last 12 years, it's pretty phenomenal," said Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain (referring to the three full terms Kitzhaber served as governor). "When the Republican far right took over the Legislature, he was 'Dr. No.' He stopped this state from being Wisconsin-lite. He took a hostile Senate and House and did everything he could to push a progressive agenda. The bottom line is: More people have health care, and better health care, because of John Kitzhaber."

Kitzhaber was an emergency room doctor when he entered the Oregon House in 1978. He served a two-year term in the House and three four-year terms in the Oregon Senate. As Senate president, he led passage of the legislation that created the Oregon Health Plan — which stretches federal Medicaid dollars to cover more low-income Oregonians than the minimum required by federal guidelines.

Then, as Oregon governor from

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Portland airport: a highly desirable workplace, for managers

After unions advocate for low-wage workers, the Port hires a consultant at \$197 an hour to develop a 'social equity' policy

By Don McIntosh
Associate editor

What do you get when you ask high-paid managers to draft a proposal to improve life for low-wage workers? A whole lot of nothing.

For nearly a year, UNITE HERE and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) have pressed the Port of Portland to do something to improve wages and job security for hundreds of low-wage workers at Portland International Airport (PDX) —

baggage handlers, wheelchair assistants, fuelers, cabin cleaners, and concessions workers.

What Port executives came up with — after months of "stakeholder" meetings — was five pages of management-speak, in which the public agency promises next to nothing. The document, presented to the Port of Portland Board of Commissioners Feb. 11, is full of sentences like these: "Integral to ensuring that airport workers, whether employees of the Port of Portland or the many contractors and concessionaire workers at PDX, are safe, healthy and able to sustain high quality work is the vigilant attention to rights and benefits afforded them. To

this end the Port will monitor and enhance existing programs as well as chart paths to new benefits not currently in place."

Say what? You can take a look at the document yourself at ow.ly/JdesJ. We did our best to boil down the verbiage, and found just two tangible improvements:

- The Port will make it easier for employers to offer subsidized bus passes to workers.
- The Port might make a computer available for workers to search for new jobs.

The other bullet points in the 1,600-word document range from vague to meaningless: The Port will "continue" to do a variety of things it's already doing;

it will "partner with state agencies" to tell workers how to sign up for Obamacare; it will "join with" the City of Portland and the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries to tell airport employers about sick leave; it will make lease-holders submit written plans on how to avoid "disruptive labor strife;" it will require contractors to detail the "minimum level of working conditions" they themselves set for employees; and on and on. There are even bullet points touting past achievements — like last November's airport job fair for pink-slipped concessions workers. The one promising item would come in 2016, when the Port would include "wages

and benefits, quality of safety training, and career development programs" in its criteria for evaluating and scoring concessions proposals.

The document was written by a cross-departmental group of 14 senior managers from human resources, legal, operations, public affairs, and finance.

Nowhere does the management-written draft admit there's a problem with low wages at the airport. In fact, it lauds PDX as "a highly desirable workplace," and "an excellent working environment in terms of safety, security and opportunities for advancement and mutual success."

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