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INSIDE

Tilikum Crossing	5
Union meetings	6
Free classifieds	10
Retirees gather	11

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IBEW Local 125 pickets Pacific Power in Portland

Pacific Power plays hardball against workers seeking to recover concessions they gave in previous contract, when the economy was struggling

By Michael Gutwig
Editor & Manager

Nearly 100 Pacific Power workers walked an informational picket line March 17-18 at the company's headquarters in Northeast Portland's Lloyd District.

About 316 members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 125 have been working under the terms of a contract that expired in January. The bargaining unit is comprised of linemen, service coordinators, me-

ter readers, substation wiremen and more who work in a region that extends from Astoria, Ore., to Walla Walla, Wash.

Pacific Power is a regulated electric monopoly that serves over 700,000 customers. It is the electricity distribution division of PacifiCorp for Oregon, Washington and California. PacifiCorp is owned by Mid-America Energy Holdings Co., which is controlled by Berkshire Hathaway. Berkshire Hathaway's primary shareholder is Warren Buffett, one of the world's richest people. The company earned nearly \$3.5 billion in gross profits during 2014.

In 2011, workers were mobilizing for a Labor Day strike when a new collective bargain-



Members of IBEW Local 125 walk information picket outside PacifiCorp headquarters in Northeast Portland. PacifiCorp is the parent company of Pacific Power, where IBEW is trying to secure a new contract.

ing agreement was reached and ratified. It was a close vote though, and many workers weren't happy with the freezes and takeaways that were part of the pact.

"Over the last three contracts, it's been all takeaways," said Randy Jamison, a 30-year employee.

The Great Recession of 2008

had a big impact on bargaining. Union members walking the informational picket line March 18 told the Labor Press they were willing to concede on some issues in order to help the company get through a difficult economy — and save customers from a threatened rate hike.

"Today, the economy is in much better shape, and the com-

pany has solid earnings," said Travis Eri, business manager of Local 125. "Workers need to get a little bit of what they gave up, back."

Berkshire bought PacifiCorp from Scottish Power in 2005. Since then, the new owner has reduced family sick leave days,

Turn to Page 12

LABOR HISTORY

A look back at Astoria's radical immigrant labor past

By Don McIntosh
Associate Editor

ASTORIA — In a museum along the river bank in Astoria, Oregon, union history buffs gathered March 14 for a look back in time. The Pacific Northwest Labor History Association could hardly have picked a more fitting conference site than the Columbia River Maritime Museum: It memorializes the oldest U.S. settlement west of the Rockies, a faded waterfront boomtown with a radical immigrant past.

Astoria was founded in 1811 as a fur-trading outpost, back when the U.S. flag had 17 stars, and California was a colony of Spain. The settlement was named for its funder, New York fur tycoon John Jacob Astor, who was then the richest man in America. In 1836, Astor commissioned Rip Van Winkle author Washington Irving to write a book about his outpost, entitled *Astoria*. A bestseller at the time, it's now forgotten. So is



Astoria's Labor Temple, built in 1924, may be the oldest union hall in the Pacific Northwest. It's still owned by a union group, the Astoria Labor Temple Association, and provides office space to several unions. But today it's best known locally as the site of the Labor Temple Bar & Diner.

the continent-wide trade in beaver pelts, which was already well into decline from over-trapping when Oregon became a state in 1859.

Astoria's labor story begins with a salmon canning boom in the 1870s. Astoria became the salmon canning capital of the world within a single decade, and it's easy to see why. It sits next to a four-mile-wide channel near the mouth of the Columbia River, through which millions of full-grown salmon must pass through in order to return to their spawning grounds in an area from Idaho to British Columbia. Fortunes were to be made, for cannery owners. But not for those catching the fish, or those canning it.

Overwhelmingly, Astoria's salmon catch came from independent gill-netters, mostly Scandinavian immigrants with fishing experience in their home countries. Gill-netters operated their own small boats in crews of one or two. At the peak, as

many as 2,000 gill-netting vessels plied the Columbia, says author and historian Irene Martin, a panelist at the labor history conference.

Gill-netting at the mouth of the Columbia was a dangerous trade. Weather could change quickly, and the sandbars and shallows where some of the best fish could be caught were unpredictable and dangerous. Boats capsized, and drownings were common. To pay death benefits to the widows, gill-netters formed the The Columbia River Fishermen's Beneficial Aid Society in 1875.

Soon after, the group began to push for higher prices from the canneries, and changed its name to the Columbia River Fisherman's Protective Union. In 1886, it affiliated with the newly formed American Federation of Labor (AFL). But the gill-netters had no feelings of solidarity for workers on the cannery

Turn to Page 2