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Classified workers at Oregon public universities get contract

By Stefan Ostrach
Special Correspondent

EUGENE — College students in Oregon will return to campuses free of labor conflict this fall. The union representing classified workers at Oregon's seven state universities agreed to new contract terms following marathon bargaining Sept. 8-9.

The contract between members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 503 and the seven universities, which bargained jointly, is a four-year deal with a reopener after two years on economics only.

"We are delighted," said Marc Nisenfeld, who led the SEIU bargaining team. He called the settlement "a pretty significant victory."

Approximately 4,000 SEIU members cook and serve food, operate power plants, maintain equipment, grounds and buildings, do clerical work, run programs, and provide other services at the University of Oregon, Oregon State University, Portland State University, Eastern Oregon University, Oregon Institute of Technology, Southern Oregon University, and Western Oregon University.

Leading up to the Sept. 8-9 negotiations, the universities

had declared "impasse" and the union was preparing a strike vote. Issues included cost-of-living adjustments (the universities initially proposed a one-half percent increase every six months), health insurance expenses, and contract language concerning overtime and layoffs.

Prior to the settlement, Eleanor Wakefield, vice president of Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation Local 3544 at the University of Oregon said "the universities would find out how important the classified staff are" if they went on strike. "I can't imagine all the services not being done on the first week students are back."

[GTFF Local 3544 had to strike for eight days last December before it could get an acceptable contract.]

Apparently the university bosses couldn't imagine a strike either, choosing to make a good offer even though two more meetings were scheduled before the start of school.

Among the gains, according to Nisenfeld, are 2.25 percent cost-of-living raises in each of the two years; maintaining employer payment of 95 percent or 97 percent of health insurance premiums for full-time employees; three-quarter-time employ-

ees (.75 FTE) now qualify for "full coverage" health insurance; and shift-differential pay for part-time employees.

"For the first time we gained on making up for past sacrifices," said Nisenfeld.

Going into negotiations, some 1,200 of the 4,000 members of the SEIU bargaining unit statewide were making less than \$15 an hour. Nisenfeld could not predict how many of them would make above \$15 as a result of the contract, but he said the union would continue to push to raise the minimum wage at the Legislature or through a ballot measure. He expressed regret that his team was not able to win a "wage floor," but he did note that they negotiated "selective salary adjustments" for seven job titles, including a two salary range jump for early childhood educators—preschool teachers who were paid between \$10.43 to \$15.28 an hour.

The union beat back all take-aways proposed by the universities (contracting out, layoffs and overtime).

SEIU members will vote on the tentative agreement by mid-October.

Another union at the University of Oregon—United Aca-

demics (American Association of University Professors and the American Federation of Teachers)—reached a tentative agreement Aug. 17 on a three-year contract. Just two weeks prior, the faculty union had warned members on its website of "the very serious gap we face at the bargaining table."

Asked how the "serious gap" was bridged in less than two weeks, United Academics President Michael Dreiling said 150 faculty showed up for bargaining.

The administration saw that the union had strong support, "and we were prepared to take negotiations into the fall," said Dreiling, an associate professor of sociology. "We didn't want to do that, and the administration surely didn't want to do that."

The new contract provides for 8 percent salary increases over three years. It also builds on groundbreaking language in the first contract to improve job security for non-tenure track faculty.

"Including our first contract, we've now guaranteed raises for faculty five years in a row," Dreiling said. "I've been at the UO for 18 years, and I've never seen anything like that before."

The contract is subject to ratification by the membership.

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