

# NORTHWEST LABOR PRESS

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VOLUME 117, NUMBER 3

PORTLAND, OREGON

FEBRUARY 5, 2016

# Workers at Portland Specialty Baking ready for union vote

Taken totally by surprise, company wages an intense — and formulaic — anti-union campaign

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On Monday, Jan. 11, two dozen workers at Portland Specialty Baking surprised company president Josh Richardson in his office, announced that they and their co-workers intend to form a union, and asked him to respect their choice. By the end of the week, they had their answer: The company lawyered up, hired a union-busting consultant, and began a cookie-cutter anti-union campaign.

The company employs 180 production workers at its Gresham industrial bakery making pretzels, cakes, bagels, and muffins for Starbucks, Franz, Safeway, Costco and Winco. It's an overwhelmingly immigrant workforce, with pay hovering around \$10 an hour.

Workers had been meeting with union organizers for up to eight months, yet not a whisper of that ever reached management's ears. If that doesn't show how little the company knows its workforce,



Workers at Portland Specialty Baking are voting on whether or not to form a union with Bakers Local 114.

this does: It put out anti-union fliers in English, despite the fact that as many as 12 languages are spoken on the shop floor. [By contrast, the union campaign has spent over \$14,000 on interpreters, and puts out its written messages in five

languages.]

"We believe having a union at Portland Specialty Baking would change our culture, and not in a good way," one company flier says. "Instead of all working together, it could turn into 'us' versus

'them,' and we don't want that to happen."

Other elements of the company's messaging follow the usual formula: Try to scare workers with what-ifs, plead with workers to give the company another chance to make things better *without* a union, and emphasize union dues, while ignoring the union wages that might make those dues a bargain.

By week two, management was holding mandatory-attendance anti-union group meetings almost daily before each shift, and summoning workers one by one to meet with managers during the work day.

The union campaign is led by organizers dispatched by the national and state AFL-CIO. Bakers Local 114, the union the workers want to join, represents workers at other industrial bakeries in the area. Its members at Franz, Safeway, Bimbo/ Oroweat, and Kroger are paid wages more than twice what workers at Portland Specialty Baking make.

Over 100 Portland Specialty Baking workers have signed union cards, and

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There's a lot at stake for working people in the month-long session of the Oregon Legislature that began Feb. 1. Labor lobbyists and legislators are hopeful that a major increase to the minimum wage may pass, as well as bills to crack down on wage theft and give cities the right to mandate the construction of affordable housing. Here are some of the top items legislators will discuss between now and March 5:

### Minimum wage

Thanks to a union-backed 2002 ballot measure, Oregon's minimum wage now stands at \$9.25 and rises with inflation. But it's still so low that a single worker working full-time year-round qualifies for food stamps. Oregon lawmakers failed last year to raise the minimum wage. But the prospect of not one but two ballot measures has stiffened their spines. One ballot measure would raise the wage to \$15 over three years; the other would raise it to \$13.50 over two years, and lift a state ban on local jurisdictions going higher. On Jan. 14, Gov. Kate Brown announced her own proposal: a two-tiered raise in the minimum wage over six years. Under her proposal, by 2022, the minimum would rise to \$13.50

## Oregon Legislature: A lot at stake for working folks



statewide and \$15.52 in the Portland metro area (within the urban growth boundary.) Brown's proposal doesn't lift the ban on local minimum wages.

### Wage theft

The law says employers have to pay employees at least minimum wage for hours worked, with paid breaks, time-and-a-half for overtime after 40 hours, and the "prevailing" wage and benefits on government construction projects. But the law only works if it's obeyed, and evidence is mounting that there's

an epidemic of employer wage and hour violations known as "wage theft" — especially in construction, restaurant work, and agriculture. Last year, lawmakers were asked to crack down on wage theft, but instead they backed down, under pressure from employer groups. This time, led by labor lawmakers like State Sen. Michael Dembrow, a bill is being reintroduced that contains the least controversial elements of last year's rejected bills. Business lobbyists representing Associated Building Industries and Associated Oregon Industries still testified against it at a Jan. 13 pre-session hearing, but labor unions and allies are making it a bigger priority. The bill would

require employers to provide workers with detailed pay stubs spelling out pay rates, hours worked, and any deductions. Employers would have to maintain those records for three years, and make them available within 45 days upon request by employees. The bill would give the state Bureau of Labor and Industries the power to require repeat offenders to post a bond guaranteeing their workers will be paid. It would also free up funds to increase enforcement,

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