

CULTURE

Today's lesson: Unions matter, especially now

By Don McIntosh

Polls say young people are increasingly favorable toward unions, yet they're increasingly less likely to have a union in their workplace. Maybe it's time for unionists to go back to school — to give class presentations *about* class, and about why unions matter. That's what retired economics professor Martin Hart-Landsberg proposed last fall at the Portland Rising committee of the worker justice non-profit Portland Jobs With Justice.

Since October, their Why Unions Matter campaign has garnered invitations to speak to as many as 300 students at more than a dozen local high school and college classes. In each presentation, Hart-Landsberg pairs up with a local union member or staff person: The union member relates a personal story about the difference the union has made in their lives, and Hart-Landsberg gives a PowerPoint-assisted big-picture explanation of what's happening in the economy — growing inequality. Since the 1970s, as unions have declined, nearly all of the economic gains from increased productivity



(WORKING) CLASS PRESENTATION: "I knew my union had my back," UNITE HERE Local 8 member Be Marston tells Lewis & Clark College professor Maryann Bylander's March 21 sociology class. Marston, a transgender bartender at Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, told a story about how her union stepped up when she faced a complaint about using a female restroom.

have gone to the top 1 percent — to corporations and owners of enterprises, not to those doing the work. Workers' buying power has stagnated.

So far, the campaign has de-

ployed speakers from National Association of Letter Carriers, UNITE HERE Local 8, International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 5, Oregon Nurses Association, Portland Association

of Teachers, and the Industrial Workers of the World. The campaign is looking for volunteers from other unions, and helps each speaker develop their presentation.

Presenting their "Unions 101" curriculum, the volunteer educators are starting from scratch. At a March 21 presentation at a Lewis & Clark College sociology class, Hart-Landsberg asked the class of about 40 students if anyone knew what "right to work" was. Not a single hand went up. [To be fair, many union members don't know what it is either. Right-to-work — a fast-spreading threat to the union movement — refers to a law meant to weaken unions by banning any requirement that workers pay dues.]

"People know so little about unions," Hart-Landsberg tells the Labor Press. But students' reaction has been very positive, Hart-Landsberg said; he'd expected to get more negative reactions. Presenters conclude each class with an invitation to sign a Jobs With Justice pledge card, committing to take part in five acts of solidarity over the next year. More than 70 students have signed them so far.

ONLINE EXTRA

Find out more about the Why Unions Matter classroom speaking campaign at <http://jwjpdx.org/whyunionsmatter>

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