

'Building Trades champion'

Construction trades unions say goodbye to retiring OHSU president Joe Robertson.

The Columbia Pacific Building and Construction Trades Council (CPBCTC) presented outgoing Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) president Dr. Joe Robertson with a plaque July 10 in recognition of his work transforming Portland's South Waterfront and Marquam Hill campus — using union labor.

Under Robertson's leadership since 2006, OHSU experienced unprecedented growth. It built the Center for Health & Healing on the South Waterfront; the Collaborative Life Sciences Building and Skourtes Tower; and the Portland Aerial Tram, connecting OHSU's South Waterfront and Marquam Hill campuses. It also has broken ground on the Knight Cancer Research Building, the Center for Health & Healing 2, and the Gary and Christine Rood Family Pavilion.

CPBCTC held its weekly meeting at the Center for Health & Healing South to make the special presentation to Robertson. Construction workers on the project were invited to attend. (See photos

right.)

Willy Myers, executive secretary of the CPBCTC, told the Labor Press that OHSU's more than \$2.5 billion investment in construction has created 20 million hours of work, which has resulted in over \$700 million paid in wages, about \$200 million in pension contributions, about \$200 million in health trust contributions, and almost \$30 million in apprenticeship training contributions.

"This plaque is just a small token of our appreciation for what Dr. Robertson has done for our members," Myers said. "He's a building trades champion."

Robertson officially retired last October, shortly after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He agreed to stay on as president while OHSU searched for his successor. His last day is July 31.

Robertson has worked at OHSU for nearly 40 years. He started as an ophthalmology resident before joining the faculty. He was named director of the Casey Eye Institute in 1997, then dean of the School of Medicine in 2003. The OHSU board of directors selected him as president in 2006.



...The West Virginia teachers strike, firsthand

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work, and nobody would get on board with it.

What was the impact of the strike? We shut down every single county school for 11 days. That was the immediate impact of it. But longer term, the impact was a sense of solidarity, and a new willingness of people to speak openly of their anger and dissatisfaction and their worries. The common theme was, "I can't afford to stay." It's bad enough when you're 10 years into your teaching career, you've got a masters degree and you're making \$40,000. But what if you're head cook and you only make \$19,000. Those are poverty wages.

From my experience in West Virginia, as a cultural

thing, you don't talk about stuff you're struggling with. You might speak about that privately, but you don't put that out there. So to have people actually talk about having to choose between medication and food, having to put off bills, and wear the same pair of shoes until the bare feet were sticking out of the bottom of it. Those things weren't really commonly spoke of, especially by people that work in the school system. So it was powerful for people to be able to speak about that and not be afraid of being ridiculed. It was more like "I'm not alone. It's not a personal failure that I can't make ends meet. It's a systemic issue."

How do you feel differently about the union today than you did a year ago? I think I

was like most people, even though I was more active, I just felt like they were kind of there for insurance purposes, and if I had an issue, I could get help filing a grievance. And that was it. And of course most people I know that weren't active in the local felt that it somehow magically worked on its own. That you would just pay your dues and somehow five or eight people in Charleston were going to magically make things better. So seeing people actually want to take an active role in the union gives me hope that it can be stronger, that we can actually get things done, because people are realizing that they are the union, and that *they* are the union bosses, that we pay our dues and we pay those people's salaries to serve us.

People all over the country were paying attention to the West Virginia teachers strike. **What do you think was the most important lesson you learned that union members elsewhere could benefit from?** That my labor belongs to me. I always felt like that I owed something to everybody. That I owed it to my coworkers to be there, my administrators, my students, parents. And the realization that withholding your labor has true power for change, and that it belongs to me — that was and is still amazing.

HEAR HER SPEAK

Monday, July 23, 7 to 8:30 p.m.
Portland Association of Teachers
office, 345 NE 8th Ave., Portland.

POLITICS

AFSCME Local 189 backs Jo Ann Hardesty for Portland City Council

Members of AFSCME Local 189, the largest union of City of Portland employees, voted July 10 to endorse Jo Ann Hardesty for Portland City Council Position 3 at their July 10 general membership meeting.

Local 189 earlier backed Andrea Valderrama for that seat in the May primary, but she placed fourth in a field of six. Hardesty, a former state legislator, came in first with 44 percent of the vote, followed by Loretta Smith, with 22 percent. Hardesty and Smith, a Multnomah County commissioner, will face each other in a run-off on the Nov. 6 general election. Both candidates have union endorsements.

Portland City Council is a non-partisan office. All four City Council members and the mayor are elected at-large in Portland.