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WORKERS' RIGHTS

OHSU fights effort by grad student researchers to unionize

Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU) has filed legal objections to a union petition that's supported by a majority of its roughly 250 graduate student research assistants. OHSU administrators argue that the research assistants are students, not workers, and thus don't have the right to unionize. That's an argument private universities have made for decades, and federal judges have gone back and forth on the question.

But particularly at OHSU, it's complete nonsense, said grad student researchers at a Nov. 15 union rally at the OHSU campus.

Marc Meadows, who's in the fourth-year of a Ph.D. program in neuroscience, attends no



"What do we want? RECOGNITION! When do we want it? NOW!"

classes, but spends more than 50 hours a week doing research in retina physiology, trying to shed light on how synapses form connections in the brain. For that work, he receives tuition remis-

sion, a \$30,000-a-year stipend, and basic health insurance coverage. He uses the same tools and works on the same project

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So much for antitrust? Government approves merger of paper mill giants

By Don McIntosh

Northwest paper mill workers, by now used to painful disappointments, got another one in November: Federal anti-monopoly regulators stood aside and allowed the nation's second largest paper producer to gobble up the nation's fifth largest paper producer. The \$3.5 billion acquisition of Chicago-headquartered KapStone by Atlanta-headquartered WestRock is the latest in a decade-long spree of mergers and acquisitions that have reduced competition and restricted supply in the U.S. paper and cardboard packaging industries — and led to a wave of job-killing mill closures.

"WestRock has set a pattern: Buy competitors, close mills, reduce supply, and drive the price up," says Greg Pallesen, president of the Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers (AWPPW). Headquartered in Portland, AWPPW represents workers at pulp and paper mills in Oregon, Washington,



Together with the Oregon Fair Trade Campaign, members of AWPPW held a picket outside the mothballed mill in Newberg calling on WestRock to reopen the mill or sell it to someone who will.

Idaho, California and Virginia. Since 2000, AWPPW has lost over 6,400 members and suffered the closure of at least 15 mills. Today it counts just 4,300 members.

Pallesen says there's no better example of WestRock's buy-it-and-shut-it-down strategy than the 2015 closure of a paper mill in Newberg, Oregon,

that had been in operation for 120 years. Before it was closed, the Newberg mill had been turning as much as 330,000 tons of recycled paper a year into newsprint and light-weight containerboard, which is used in making corrugated cardboard boxes.

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UNION ORGANIZING

Hawthorne Burgerville goes union

By Don McIntosh

Workers at a third Burgerville restaurant are seeking federally-mandated union recognition. In April and May, workers at the company's 92nd and Powell and Gladstone locations showed majority support for the Burgerville Workers Union in a pair of elections run by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Now, 20 of the 25 crew members at the 1122 SE Hawthorne Boulevard store have signed union authorization cards as well, and on Nov. 16 they asked the NLRB to hold an election.

Once the election is held, the Hawthorne Burgerville workers expect to join union contract negotiations that are already under way for the first two unionized stores.

"To say it's been slow going would be putting it lightly," said union spokesperson Emmett Schlenz about the contract talks, which have taken place every two to four weeks since late



May.

Schlenz, an employee at the Hawthorne restaurant, says Burgerville Workers Union gave the company all its proposals last summer. The union proposals include an immediate \$5-an-hour across-the-board raise (currently, substantially all crew members earn within a dollar of the \$12-an-hour Portland-area

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RETIREMENT

Congress delays report on union pension fix

A special Congressional task force missed its deadline to solve a looming crisis in union-sponsored pensions. Pension plans covering an estimated 1.2 million Americans are projected to run out of money in the next 20 years, and the collapse of the largest of them, the Central States Teamsters Pension, will wipe out the government's own insurance program for multiemployer pensions by about 2025.

The Joint Select Committee on Solvency of Multiemployer Pension Plans, created in February, was supposed to produce a report and vote on a solution by the end of November. Instead, the committee chairs Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) and Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) issued a Nov. 29 statement saying the committee has made significant pro-

gress, and that a bipartisan solution is attainable, but more time is needed so the committee can continue its work.

The plan they're working on could be good news for union members. The *Washington Post* obtained a draft of one bill being considered by the committee that would direct the Treasury Department to spend up to \$3 billion a year to subsidize payments for retirees in failed pension plans, an expense that would be partly offset by a big increase in the insurance premiums that all union-sponsored multiemployer pension plans pay. The bill would also reverse controversial retiree benefit cuts that about a dozen pension plans have made in order to halt their slide toward insolvency.