

**UNION ORGANIZING**

# Refugee nonprofit won't be union-neutral

IRCO rejects AFSCME's play-nice request and fires a union supporter

By Don McIntosh

Immigrant & Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) — the non-profit hub of Portland-area efforts to resettle refugees — isn't going to make it easy for its employees to unionize. After months of meetings with workers interested in unionizing, staff at Oregon AFSCME approached IRCO management with a request that the group stay neutral toward employee union efforts. Executive director Lee Po Cha declined, and hired management-side labor law firm Bullard Law.

IRCO employs around 200 full-time and part-time staff, plus hundreds more "casual" employees like interpreters. Funded primarily by government grants, the organization assists refugees in a myriad of ways, from English language classes to after-school programs, job placement, and help with food, rent and utilities.

Last year a small group of employees started talking with Oregon AFSCME, meeting at coffee shops and later at the union's Portland hall.

Sahar Yarjani Muranovic, now a union-backed candidate running unopposed for David Douglas School Board, was one of them. She worked at IRCO as a volunteer and training coordinator — until December 10, when she quit and sent a three-page let-



IRCO union supporter Olivia Katbi-Smith at a March 16 union rally for workers at Little Big Burger.

ter to management explaining why. Among the reasons she cited: Immigrants and people of color make up most of the staff, but earn less than native-born white staff for the same work, and have a slower track to promotion.

Muranovic's exit moved others to speak out. Dozens signed a petition to management. Dated Dec. 13, it accuses supervisors broadly of abusive practices and "microaggressions" and describes IRCO as a racially hostile environment. The petition calls for an outside "diversity, equity and inclusion" audit and asks management to be transparent about how IRCO is complying with a new state law requiring

equal pay for comparable work. IRCO employee Olivia Katbi-Smith — who in her off hours is the volunteer co-chair of the Portland chapter of Democratic Socialists of America — had publicly spoken out in support of other union campaigns. She signed the petition.

After the petition, IRCO managers changed, says Katbi-Smith says: They started visiting workers for one-on-one "check-ins." One manager took employees out to lunch and spoke against the union.

For three years, Katbi-Smith had worked part-time at IRCO as a fundraising development assistant. Now, in an April 3 email, her manager said IRCO had decided to make her position full-time, and gave her one day to decide whether to take it, with termination if she declined.

When Katbi-Smith said she wouldn't give up her second job — coaching track at Parkrose High School — IRCO terminated her, just weeks before a May 2 fundraising gala she was to have helped put on.

"So I'm confused," Katbi-Smith wrote back in an incredulous email. "You'd be terminating me if I'm unable to work 40 hours because you're ... short staffed?"

In charges filed on her behalf with the National Labor Relations Board, AFSCME alleges her termination was anti-union retaliation, in violation of federal labor law.

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