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Workers could strike Oregon universities as soon as Sept. 27

Rejecting a 2% wage increase as too little too late, Oregon public university support workers were taking a strike vote Sept. 16-17 as this edition headed to press, and expecting to give a 10-day strike notice afterward. The strike would involve about 5,000 members of SEIU Local 503 at Oregon's seven public universities. Their wages have risen just 13% in 10 years, while the cost of living has risen 19% in that time. This year, university administrators gave managers 3% raises while sticking to a 0% offer since February for the clerical support staff, custodians, and cafeteria workers of Local 503. On Sept. 13, the employer offer increased to 2%, but members want to make up for lost ground. The union is proposing raises of 3% and 3.25%.



Support staff rallied Sept. 12 at Oregon State University in Corvallis.

"We're asking for a cost-of-living increase that reflects the cost of living," says Local 503 spokesperson Jay Parasco.

Further bargaining will take place Sept. 23.

—Don McIntosh

UNION ORGANIZING

DePaul treatment center agrees to recognize union

By Don McIntosh

Facing low wages and high turnover, workers at DePaul Treatment Services started talking with Oregon AFSCME several months ago about unionizing. The campaign moved quickly, and soon an overwhelming majority of the addiction recovery agency's 108 employees had signed union authorization cards.

On Aug. 20, they requested a union election, but that proved unnecessary: DePaul agreed Sept. 3 to voluntarily recognize the union.

DePaul Treatment Services is a non-profit agency that works to help people recover from alcohol and drug addiction and related mental health conditions. It was founded by the Portland Society of St. Vincent de Paul in 1974, but became an independent secular charity in 1977. Its main facility at 1312 SW Washington St. in downtown Portland includes a 24-hour residential treatment center, a medical detox facility, and an outpatient clinic that dispenses suboxone, a drug used to treat opioid addiction. DePaul also treats addicted adolescents at a facility at 4310 NE Killingsworth St., and operates a smaller outpatient location at 205 SE Third Ave. in Hillsboro.

Karl Hence, who has a degree in substance abuse counseling, makes \$14 an hour as a residential counselor at the downtown location, and depends on the Oregon Health Plan for health insurance and Section 8 housing vouchers for help with rent.

"The pay for what we do is very low," Hence said. "I could go down to a restaurant and start at more than that, but I don't want to. I want to help people."

Through a county-wide campaign called United We Heal, AFSCME has made the case to non-profit funders that low pay leads to high turnover and affects the quality of care.

"It really affects clients," says Oregon AFSCME spokesperson David Kreisman. "If they're used to seeing somebody, they develop a level of rapport and trust. When that person disappears, it can hurt their treatment."

"We care very deeply about these clients," Hence said. "We want to continue working for a nonprofit agency, but with the cost of living getting where it is, it's getting very difficult."

The new DePaul union includes addiction counselors and outreach workers, detox nurses, nurse practitioners, and teachers. The two sides expect to meet soon to begin negotiating a collective bargaining agreement.

"THERE IS NO GOOD SOCIETY WITHOUT A GOOD UNION, AND THERE IS NO GOOD UNION THAT ISN'T REBORN EVERY DAY IN THE PERIPHERIES, THAT DOESN'T TRANSFORM THE REJECTED STONES OF THE ECONOMY INTO CORNER STONES." — POPE FRANCIS



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