

Who's on our side?

By Graham Trainor Oregon AFL-CIO President



Graduate employees are workers too

A job is so much more than a paycheck. It gives us pride, becomes part of our identity, can provide meaning to our life, and makes us feel productive and valuable to our communities. Whether we love or hate our job, whether we work part time, full time, or overtime, our work plays a significant role in our daily lives.

Unfortunately, the lens through which workers and bosses analyze the value of work often couldn't be more divergent. Working people have to fight for everything we have, nothing is given to us. At the same time, bosses look for ways to devalue our work, marginalize our demands, and keep us in our place.

These divergent views are starkly evident on university campuses nationwide and across Oregon. Graduate employees and graduate researchers from Eugene to Corvallis to Marquam Hill in Portland have for months been fighting for a recognition that their work has value and is, indeed, work.

Meanwhile, university officials are pulling out all the stops to devalue and disrespect these workers.

Take the Graduate Researchers United at Oregon Health and Science University as an example. These graduate researchers organized their first union with AFSCME more than a year ago, and yet they continue to face disrespect at the bargaining table and are still without a first contract. The sticking point? Management's claim that these hard-working researchers are not employees, while blatantly disrespecting the union's bargaining team with constant delay tactics.

Just a few weeks ago, the Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)-affiliated union of graduate workers at the University of Oregon, was gearing up for a strike after months of negotiations where management seemed hell-bent on attacking their healthcare benefits. In the 11th hour, just days before a strike was set to begin, the two sides reached an agreement. Why was yet another group of workers at a public institution in Oregon ready and willing to strike? The value of their work was challenged, their benefits were being attacked, and they collectively chose to take a stand.

Today, the Coalition of Graduate Employees, an AFT-affiliated union of graduate workers at Oregon State University, is bargaining with management and fighting some of the same challenges at the bargaining table.

Whether it's the Trump Administration's recent Department of Labor rule aimed at reclassifying graduate workers at private universities as students and eliminating their ability to form unions and bargain collectively, or these examples of public institutions of higher learning right here in Oregon undermining and devaluing the work of graduate workers, it's clear to me the Corporate Agenda recognizes the power that has come with the growth of graduate worker unions in recent years.

From calling out the undue influence of Corporate America on our public universities, to educating the public about the significant drop in state funding for higher education, to debunking the myth that graduate workers can't be employees — faculty, classified, and graduate employee unions on our public university campuses are holding the line and fighting back. This work has value and is important, and the Oregon Union Movement stands united behind these fights for fairness and dignity on the job, and won't stop until we get it.

The Oregon AFL-CIO is a 138,000-member-strong federation of labor unions.

...BATTLE IN SEATTLE

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around, individual labor union members made their own decision. Others stood in the street and caucused with fellow members. Maybe a third of the marchers kept going, and were greeted with cheers like reinforcing cavalry when they arrived at occupied intersections.

Steelworker Erv Schleufer is one of those who kept going. Now retired, in 1999 he was a participant in a bitter strike-lockout at the Kaiser aluminum smelter in Spokane and had traveled the West as a union "road warrior" speaking about their struggle.

"We had spent all those months and tens of thousands of miles preparing for this," Schleufer says. "I started thinking about my history teacher in high school... I realized this was becoming a moment in history."

While Schleufer and thousands of other labor marchers lingered with the occupiers for an hour or two, police held back from further attempts to clear the streets. As unionists left, the police moved back in forcefully. As night fell, Seattle Mayor Paul Schell declared a curfew and police pushed the remaining protesters out of downtown into the Capital Hill neighborhood.

Police crackdown

Further protests had been planned throughout the WTO summit. But now the mayor declared a huge area of downtown Seattle a "protest free zone," in violation of the U.S. Constitution. On the morning of Wednesday, Dec. 1, National Guard members stood watch near the Convention Center. Squads of police in riot gear zoomed through the streets in armored personnel carriers on the lookout for protesters. Groups of protesters who entered downtown were subject to mass arrests. Over 500 were arrested, put on buses, taken to Sand Point Naval Base, and later transferred to King County Jail, where they were held until the end of the WTO summit. Unable to assemble near the Convention Center, protesters and community members surrounded the jail demanding their release. Contingents of unionists brought food and supplies to the jailhouse vigil, which continued for days.



Photo by Mike Barkin.

In the afternoon on Dec. 1, the USW led hundreds on a march to the Seattle waterfront, outside the protest-free zone. When the rally there ended, activists pleaded for unionists to enter downtown and defy the ban. Schleufer and others marched into downtown and soon felt the shock of police concussion grenades and the sting of tear gas. "We could see canisters flipping through the air, and people running from the gas. I lost about half my vision and had a hard time breathing," he said.

On Dec. 3, the final day of the WTO meeting, the King County Labor Council was ready to defy the "protest-free" zone. With marshals holding ropes to mark the perimeter of the march, unionists and allies marched into downtown ... and were left alone by police.

Meanwhile, local labor leaders had pushed for jailed protesters to be released. McWilliams, the ILWU president, threatened to shut down the port again if the mayor didn't release them. The mayor relented.

The WTO talks collapse

Lori Wallach, then and now the leader of Global Trade Watch, spent much of that week inside the WTO meeting, lobbying foreign trade ministers as a credentialed observer. Wallach says leading up to the summit, there'd already been tensions among trade negotiators. The United States and some other developed countries were pressuring poor nations to agree to things like stricter pharmaceutical monopolies, and arrogantly dismissed the proposals of African and Latin American nations. What brought the situation inside to a boil was the existence of invitation-only "green rooms," where delegates from the "important" nations met for long hours to hash out a final deal they expected the rest of the nations to approve.

"Because of that, there were extended periods of time where there would be a whole set of delegates from Africa, Latin

America, the Caribbean, basically left in the halls watching the protests on big TVs hung in the halls," Wallach said. "They'd come all this way and now they were being left out of the negotiations, watching these American protesters being beaten up and tear gassed.

"The passion and commitment displayed in those protests was the last special ingredient to tip over the edge a process that was already seen as illegitimate and not in the interests of a lot of the member countries."

On the final day of the summit, the WTO announced that the meeting had failed: Delegates were unable to agree on the terms of a new global deal.

The aftermath

Exhilarated by the Battle in Seattle, anti-corporate-globalization activists tried to recreate that success at other international summits, but with less success. The WTO held its next meeting in 2001 in Doha, Qatar, a Gulf State monarchy where visa restrictions prevented a recurrence of protest. After the 9/11 attacks, the anti-WTO activist movement subsided. But the political stigma of the WTO persisted.

"The WTO never recovered from its crisis of legitimacy," Wallach says. Negotiations continued for 15 years, but never resulted in a new agreement.

Now, even the WTO's trade dispute process is grinding to a halt. When two member nations can't resolve a trade dispute, it's supposed to be decided by a three-judge panel selected from a seven-member WTO court of appeals. But as their terms expire, the Trump Administration has been unilaterally blocking the appointment of new judges. The body is down to just three members, the minimum needed to hear a case. On Dec. 9, the terms of two more judges will expire, at which point the WTO will be incapable of hearing appeals, and thus have no way to enforce its rules.