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Health care workers on the front lines

By Don McIntosh

As hospitals prepare for an expected surge in serious respiratory illnesses from the coronavirus, medical staff are sounding the alarm.

AFSCME Local 328 officer Casey Parr, a respiratory therapist at Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU), is on the front line of the epidemic. Part of his job is to operate the mechanical ventilators that will keep people alive, but he and his co-workers are already running short of the gear they'll need to keep themselves from getting infected.

For now, Parr says OHSU has no shortage of disposable gloves and gowns, but N-95 masks are in desperately short supply.

The normal practice is to put on a disposable N-95 mask before seeing any patient who may have infectious disease, and discard the mask afterward. Now, Parr says, he's being issued just one N-95 mask for each 12-hour shift that he works at the hospital. After each patient, he takes



Casey Parr, a union shop steward, has worked at OHSU as a respiratory therapist for 10 years. In direct contact with COVID-19 patients, he's being given just one N-95 mask per day.

off the mask, which is potentially soiled with the virus, stores it in a paper bag, and then uses gloves to carefully put it back on before the next patient.

Parr said OHSU also has about 50 PAPRs (Powered Air-Purifying Respirators) to protect workers, but is out of the dispos-

able face shields that complete the seal on the devices.

"To be honest, we're scared," Parr said. "We don't feel supported with the safety equipment we need. There's a lot of fear about contacting this virus and then transmitting it to either our co-workers or patients, or our family."

Parr, 35, lives with his wife, their 9-month old baby boy, and his mother-in-law, who's approaching her 70s.

"It's a frightening thought to think that I could contract this virus, and transmit it."

As an extra precaution, Parr is now changing out of his scrubs before he leaves, and leaving his work shoes at the hospital. His street clothes then go immediately into the washer when he gets home, and he showers before he greets his family.

For employees who are symptomatic, OHSU has set up a drive-through test. Parr said at

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WORKERS RIGHTS

NLRB suspends all union elections indefinitely

Citing coronavirus, the agency says even scheduled mail elections can't go forward.

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) announced March 19 that it won't conduct any union representation elections, even by mail, until at least April 3—due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Just the day before, the agency had announced it would suspend in-person elections, but would still conduct elections via mail if a business and union agree. Because union elections require people to congregate, that made sense in the midst of an epidemic. But ending mail ballots too?

The memo says the suspension is "to ensure the health and safety of our employees, as well as those members of

the public who are involved in the election process."

Workers at the U.S. Postal Service are still handling and delivering mail. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control says there have been no confirmed cases of COVID-19 as a result of touching mail, and that there is very low risk due to the poor survivability of coronaviruses on these types of surfaces.

But NLRB agents—except those needed to handle mail—have been teleworking since March 16, and the agency's practice for counting ballots still requires some human contact. NLRB agents count mail ballots in front of observers from both sides; verifying them could be a challenge if they observe CDC recommendation to maintain six feet of distance.

In crisis, working people need help and benefits

By Don McIntosh

Eryn Byram's job is to help union members in time of need. She's never been busier.

Byram wears two hats. She's director of Labor's Community Services Agency, which puts donations from labor unions and the United Way to work helping union members who are facing hardship. She's also a labor specialist for non-profit Worksystems Inc. in Oregon's dislocated worker program. Normally that means addressing rooms full of workers facing mass layoffs—to tell them what benefits they're entitled to and how to apply. But with in-person meetings banned during the COVID-19 pandemic, they're taking place online and by phone through the Zoom remote conferencing service.

And the laid-off worker meetings are coming fast and furious. Just this week Byram gave pre-

HOW TO HELP UNION MEMBERS IN NEED

Labor's Community Service Agency is appealing for donations to help workers impacted by coronavirus shutdowns. Contributed funds go to provide housing assistance, emergency childcare, food resources and more to working families in Oregon and Southwest Washington, such as laid-off janitors and maintenance workers, stagehands and theater workers, bus drivers, housekeepers, public school classified staff and teachers, and others. Contributions can be made online at lcsaportland.org/donate-1 or by mail to LCSA, 9955 SE Washington, Suite 301, Portland OR 97216.

HOW TO APPLY FOR UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS

[File for unemployment in the state you work in, whether or not you live in that state.]

OREGON The best bet is online at secure.emp.state.or.us/ocs4/, or you can call 1-877-FILE-4-UI, but hold times are long.

WASHINGTON Apply at esd.wa.gov/unemployment, or if you must, 800-318-6022 — phone wait times are long.

sentations to several hundred laid-off movie and television workers in IATSE Local 488, nearly 1,000 laid-off hotel and airport concessions workers who belong to UNITE HERE Local 8, roughly 700 workers laid off

from Daimler Trucks North America, and about 650 members of Laborers Local 483 who were laid off from the Oregon Zoo and Portland Parks and Recreation.

Amid so much need, it helps

that the Oregon and Washington unemployment agencies were able to greatly relax requirements that normally apply to unemployment claims, and that a new federal expansion of benefits was signed into law March 27. Normally, workers receiving unemployment insurance benefits have to be actively looking for work, but when their employer has temporarily laid them off and expects to reopen, they just have to stay in contact with their employer and be available to work when called back. Also, normally you have to be "able and available" to work, meaning you're not sick and you have adequate childcare. That's being waived in the crisis: If you're sick with the virus or being quarantined because of exposure, or you can't work because school or day care closures left you without childcare, you can still

collect unemployment benefits.

Unfortunately, unemployment agencies in both states are incredibly overwhelmed, with a tsunami of applicants in a single week. Offices are closed except by appointment, phone hold times are long, and claimants are being urged to apply online. Even there, the volume has at times been too great, with reports of occasional crashes in the Oregon Employment Department's online claim portal. Application processing is also backlogged, so it may be several weeks before applicants get the checks they're entitled to. Still, Byram says, it's vital that workers be patient, apply, and continue to file weekly. Workers have a right to unemployment insurance benefits when they're out of work through no fault of their own; that's why employers pay into the fund.