

CITY OF PORTLAND

Collective bereavement?

Mayor says it's time to acknowledge Black employees are grieving 400 years of oppression.

After 10 days of street protests over the Minneapolis police killing of George Floyd, Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler announced in a June 8 email that City of Portland workers can take up to a week of paid bereavement leave "to grieve and reflect."

That's a big expansion of the bereavement leave spelled out in City union contracts, like the one covering members of the six-union District Council of Trade Unions (DCTU). Up to now, paid bereavement leave has been limited to three days, plus up to two days of necessary funeral travel time, and only for immediate family: parents, siblings, grandparents, in-laws and so on. Paid bereavement leave didn't extend as far as uncles and cousins, though bureau directors could grant it at their discretion, "under exceptional circumstances." The contract also gives City workers up to four hours paid time off to attend a co-worker's funeral.

The new bereavement leave is temporary, a June 23 email from the Bureau of Human Resources explained further, to allow staff "a chance to grieve over the recent loss of Black lives in America and the trauma that has accompanied this."

"The intention of this bereavement leave centers on the needs and experiences first and foremost of our Black employees during a movement of Black justice and a recognition of all the

trauma that Black employees face in their everyday lives given systemic racism," the HR email said. "Additionally, we intended to give space for BIPOC communities experiencing racism and processing a lot of trauma during this time as well. [BIPOC is a recently coined acronym for "Black, Indigenous and people of color."] And finally, we wanted to provide space for individuals in close proximity to these experiences as a multi-racial or white family member with immediate family members experiencing the trauma of racism. We want to encourage our white employees to do some reflection on how to step up and cover the work space so that BIPOC and those employees that truly need the time can grieve and take time to care for themselves."

City unions weren't consulted on the new benefits, but neither were they inclined to refuse the sudden generosity. Still, it came as a surprise in a city that has stonewalled union proposals for essential worker bonus pay as well as pay differentials for workers who are fluent enough to speak foreign languages with members of the public.

Eight days after the bereavement leave announcement, the mayor issued another unilateral addition: City workers will have a new paid holiday, Juneteenth (June 19), to celebrate the emancipation of enslaved people in the United States. City unions expect that will come in addition to the 10 paid holidays union contracts currently recognize.



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