

UNION ORGANIZING

Columbia Gorge behavioral health workers join AFSCME

For Oregon AFSCME, it's an unbroken string of organizing wins at behavioral health agencies.

By Noah Wass

A group of 112 workers at the Mid-Columbia Center for Living is the latest in a string of behavioral healthcare units to unionize with Oregon AFSCME.

On June 11, AFSCME submitted union cards signed by 70% of the workers to the Oregon Employment Relations Board. That came just one month and six days after workers first contacted the union.

The workers provide mental health and addiction recovery services to residents of Hood River, Wasco, and Sherman counties at clinics in The Dalles, Hood River, and

Moro. Unlike at other recent campaigns, which were at non-profit organizations, Mid-Columbia Center for Living workers are public employees — employed by an intergovernmental agency that is overseen by a tri-county board of commissioners.

AFSCME's campaign at Mid-Columbia Center for Living is part of United We Heal, a nationwide AFSCME effort to organize behavioral healthcare professionals in a sector plagued by high turnover.

The COVID-19 pandemic called for a new set of organizing methods. Union supporter Sarah Smutz said workers held meetings via video chat, and in-person in parks, wearing masks while social distancing.



Portland General Electric's new lineman training facility is being constructed at least in part by nonunion labor. Operating Engineers Local 701 reports that Portland-based general contractor Reimers & Jolivette has hired nonunion Duke Construction to do the dirt prep work and excavation on the site, located at 20680 SW Langer Parkway in Sherwood, Oregon. That drew the attention of Local 701's giant inflatable rat to the site June 26 and 29. On June 30, the rat showed up at PGE's downtown Portland headquarters. The Sherwood Line Training Center project will include 16,000 square feet of offices, classrooms, and indoor training areas. It will also include outdoor facilities, and will replace an existing outdoor training facility on the same 33-acre site.

...Wages rise up to \$4 overnight in new painters contracts



CATCH-UP TIME: Painters District Council 5 representative Scott Oldham, sporting a union-logo COVID safety mask above, says when members of Painters Local 10 showed they were ready to strike, that strengthened the argument at the bargaining table that local union painters were overdue for a big raise. Oldham says local union painters had fallen well behind painters elsewhere, and behind other building trades workers. The resulting collective bargaining agreements provide immediate raises of \$2.62 to \$4.27 an hour.

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Contractors (AWCC). Ratified June 17, it locks in a minimum hourly rate for journeyman of \$27.00. Up to now, AWCC employers have employed painters under the terms of the SPCO agreement, which they had no hand in negotiating. Most AWCC contractors were paying above the SPCO scale. Pay increases under the new AWCC contract are retroactive to April 1 so that members will get a check for the difference based on prior wage levels and hours worked. The agreement runs through June 30, 2024.

Because Local 10 members rotate in and out of jobs for both groups of contractors, ballots were mailed out to all 437 local union painters for each of the contracts. Both employer groups must use Local 10's hiring hall for referrals before they can hire off the street.

The two agreements cover work done in Oregon and six Southwest Washington counties: Clark, Cowlitz, Skamania, Klickitat, Wahkiakum, and Pacific.

The contracts are similar but not identical: The new hourly wage is 44 cents higher at AWCC, but SPCO contractors will pay 30 cents an hour more toward the union-sponsored pen-

sion. There are also differences in provisions governing overtime, pay for travel time, and bonus pay for working out of area. Employers pay for parking under the SPCO contract.

"We finally got a real raise," says Painters District Council 5 field representative Scott Oldham.

For Oldham, 51, a catch-up contract has been something he's wanted since 2001, when he first became active in Local 10.

"This is the reason I started participating in the union," Oldham said. "I was like, 'Why is our wage so low?'"

Oldham says wages for local union painters have been stagnant in recent years, and even fell behind the wages of the most skilled nonunion painters (though union benefits have always been superior.)

To lay the ground for a big catch-up raise, the union first negotiated back the ability to strike in 2017. Previously, contracts had specified that an arbitrator would set terms when the two sides couldn't agree. Then last October, the union formed a member contract committee to get organized and ready. As many as 80 members took part in committee meetings, half of which were held in English and half in Spanish. Oldham said the campaign ended up

raising member expectations so much that even raises of over \$3 an hour — the biggest in 38 years — came as a disappointment for some members. Oldham himself thought the raise would be bigger than that when bargaining began, but the COVID-19 crisis made it harder for the contract committee to meet and maintain momentum, and it added economic uncertainty to the industry. Plans for some kinds of construction, like hotels, were stopped dead. And commercial office projects may also have a harder time penciling out as companies adjust to having more employees work from home.

Oldham says union members hope to continue to make up more ground in future negotiations. In Seattle, journeyman painters in Local 300 make \$31.15 an hour for commercial work under the master agreement.

The big wage increases won't just make a difference in members' take-home pay. They may also make it easier for the union to recruit more painters and thereby grow the union workforce. No sooner was the contract ratified than Oldham started putting posters up at paint suppliers advertising the new higher wages under the headline "painters needed."