

At a model library, cuts and turmoil

By Don McIntosh

Last month we reported that previously announced layoffs at Multnomah County Library were mostly averted after an organized outcry by rank-and-file library workers. That wasn't the whole story, by a long shot. Library workers, members of AFSCME Local 88, are still mourning the 128 positions that were cut, out of 580 total. As many as 43 positions had been vacant, but over two dozen workers took early retirement or layoff to spare co-workers, a wrenching decision. Dozens more faced demotions, hour reductions, and wage cuts when their positions were eliminated and replaced with temporary jobs. Seven transferred to temporary COVID-response positions at Multnomah County, with no assurance they'll have a job after Dec. 31.

What was most galling about the cuts is that they weren't dictated by any budget necessity, but were ordered at the discretion of library director Vailey Oehlke a week after the library's fully-staffed annual budget had been approved. The library faces no budget threat because it's funded by a dedicated property tax that county voters approved in 2012 by 62%—in order to put an end to recurring cuts in hours and services.

In phone interviews and on-line correspondence, over a dozen library workers described a profound loss of trust in library management. Workers say the position cuts and the resulting wallop to morale are a major blow to one of the top library systems in the country. As of 2016, Multnomah County Library had the nation's fourth highest circulation, 19.2 million (3.4 million less than the New York Public Library).

"You're getting rid of all these good, talented, creative people, who are just trying their best to serve the community," said library assistant Susanne Lohkamp, one of at least five staff at the Woodstock branch who took early retirement in September to save the job of a co-worker. "There was no budgetary reason for it. To me that's the ultimate disservice."

Oehlke's justifications for the cuts left workers perplexed. To allow for social distancing, each branch was assigned a maximum safe capacity, but the staff limits were calculated based on the idea of letting a number of patrons back in, even though there's no date set to do that. In other words: permanent staff reductions now, to create socially distant space for patrons at some undetermined time in the future.

"It seems like they're sitting on their hands for the sake of saying that their hands are tied," said Joe Clement, a union steward at the Central Library.

After one worker used the library email system to express anger and grief over the cuts, the library's executive management team faced an email uprising in mid-August. Dozens of workers chimed in via emails sent to all library staff over the next week, imploring management to reconsider. After a week, library executives limited workers' latitude to send emails.

Oehlke explained the move to the *Labor Press* Sept. 26, saying staff who didn't want to be part of the thread had begun blocking the all-staff email account.

"We are currently working on other channels we can create for that kind of cross-organization communication, that is 'opt-in,'" Oehlke said.

If the cuts wounded, it's because many library workers see these not as jobs, but chosen careers to which they have a profound, passionate commitment.

"We are an eclectic group of nerds, book-lovers, and introverts, with a strong community service ethic," says library clerk Gina Greenlaw, one of the workers who had her position eliminated. "The library is kind of like



CRATES, CRATES EVERYWHERE: It's what one worker called "hygiene theater." More than three months after scientists determined that inanimate objects like books are very unlikely to be a source of COVID-19 transmission, materials are still being "quarantined" for 96 hours at the Midland branch (left) and throughout the Multnomah County Library system, delaying the time it takes for patrons to receive materials they place on hold.

nirvana for us, for people who love language and words."

Greenlaw was placed in a temporary position through Dec. 31, but suffered a demotion and a \$3.82 an hour pay cut.

To fight the cuts, union stewards and other library workers created an *ad hoc* group, Multnomah County Library Workers United. They set up a web site and Facebook group, and circulated an online letter signed by as many as 1,000 people. They got expressions of support from a number of prominent figures, including Portland author Cheryl Strayed and Noam Chomsky, the world-famous linguist and public intellectual.

The position cuts come at the same time the library finds itself

unable to meet demand for items patrons are placing on hold. The library reopened in June with system-wide holds curtailed. Oehlke said that's because the area at the Isom Operations Center where books are sorted for delivery is too small to operate at full capacity with social distancing. But Oehlke rejected workers' calls to add extra hours and shifts to reduce the backlog.

"The thing that saddens me the most about these layoffs is the impact on the community," says Kyra Hahn, a librarian whose position was eliminated. Kahn moved to Portland from Denver last November to accept a position that required Black cultural competency. Her last day was Sept. 30.

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