

NORTHWEST LABOR PRESS

(International Standard Serial Number 0894-444X)

Established in 1900 in Portland, Oregon as a voice of the labor movement. Published on a semi-monthly basis on the first and third Fridays of each month by the Oregon Labor Press Publishing Co. Inc., a non-profit mutual benefit corporation owned by 20 unions and councils including the Oregon AFL-CIO. Serving more than 120 union organizations in Oregon and Southwest Washington.

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Printed on recycled paper, using soy-based inks, by members of Teamsters Local 747-M.

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...Providence deal took 3 years

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gaining agreement provides raises of 2%, 1.5%, and 1.5% in May 2021, 2022, and 2023. But it also continues the hospital's discretion to base pay rates on management's judgment of employees' "merit." That's rare for union contracts. Wages will rise more than the annual minimums though, union spokesperson Tara Noftsier explained, because of other pay features in the contract.

The agreement establishes a convoluted set of pay ranges — for each job classification, when an employee starts and when they reach the 5, 15, and 20 year mark, the contract specifies minimum, mid-range, and maximum pay. Because many workers are making less than the minimums in that scale, they'll get raises. Local 49 estimates wages will rise on average 13% over the course of the three years, or just under 4.5% a year. Some will see greater improvements, and some smaller. The biggest increases will go to the least-paid workers, including housekeepers, whose starting wage rose from \$14.03 to \$15.30 an hour.



The contract also requires the hospital to give workers their schedules at least two weeks in advance (some previous schedule postings had said, "check daily.") And it includes certain basic union rights, like the right to have a union steward present during disciplinary meetings with a manager, and the requirement that all discipline be grounded on "just cause."

Portland-based Local 49 represents 10,000 health care workers at Kaiser Permanente, Legacy Health Systems, Peacehealth, and several smaller hospitals. Providence, based in Renton, Washington, is a chain

of 51 hospitals in six states.

At every stage, Providence fought to frustrate and oppose the union. As bargaining dragged on and on, Providence said it couldn't give interim raises to union members, but it relented after Local 49 complained to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).

"I think part of them dragging it out was really trying to break our willpower and break our desire to have a contract," said housekeeper Melissa O'Neil, a 17-year Providence Milwaukie employee and member of the union bargaining team. "But it didn't work."

Though nurses at the hospital are represented by Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals (OFNHP), this was the first unit of hospital support workers at Providence to unionize with Local 49, and it's still the only one. In December 2018, a similar group of 800 workers at Providence Portland Medical Center voted by a razor-thin margin to unionize, but Trump appointees to the NLRB overturned that result last July by reinterpreting a single smudged ballot.

"It doesn't matter how small you are," O'Neil said. "You know, David fought Goliath and won, and so did we."

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