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Office location:
4275 NE Halsey St., Portland, Oregon

Mailing address:
P.O. Box 13150, Portland, OR 97213

Phone: (503) 288-3311

Web address:
<http://nwlaborpress.org>

Editor & Manager: Michael Gutwig
Associate editor: Don McIntosh
Office manager: Jill Lukens

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UNION ORGANIZING

Workers at Hillsboro library join AFSCME

By Don McIntosh

A group of 101 workers at Hillsboro's two library locations has joined Oregon AFSCME after a short, conflict-free union campaign.

After workers contacted the union in February, they formed a committee, met weekly via video conferencing, and used workplace social networks to collect signed union authorization cards from 70% of the workers at the two Hillsboro library branches, Shute Park and Brookwood. At an April 20 meeting of Hillsboro City Council, three library workers asked the City to voluntarily recognize the union. City Manager Robbie Hammond agreed, with details being finalized June 1 as this issue went to press.

By video chat, librarians Mary Davis and Elena Gleason told the *Labor Press* they and their co-workers love their jobs, and they want a union in order to make improvements. They say the library has been relying too heavily on part-time and on-call workers, who lack benefits. [There's already progress to re-



BY THE BOOK CAMPAIGN: Unlike for private sector workers covered under federal law, Oregon law makes getting a union for public workers—like those at Hillsboro's Shute Park library, above—as easy as signing cards.

port: After the union campaign began, the city announced it will start offering benefits to those workers starting next January.] Employees are also concerned about being asked to work “out of classification”—doing higher-responsibility jobs for long periods at lower wages than what a worker would be paid to do that job permanently.

Davis said several part-time workers spearheaded a previous attempt to unionize with Oregon's other major public employee union, SEIU Local 503, but that effort failed to develop enough momentum.

This time, the campaign spread quickly. Meeting by video made it easy to organize, Gleason says—easy for parents to attend meetings, for example. The effort had no real opposition. Even library workers who felt

they wouldn't personally benefit from the union saw its potential to win improvements for struggling part-time and on-call co-workers. Gleason said the 30% who didn't sign cards were mostly infrequently assigned on-call workers that they weren't able to reach.

Some library workers may have feared management's reaction to union efforts, but Davis says library managers honored Oregon's public employee collective bargaining law, which says management isn't supposed to oppose unionization or interfere in any way.

“Before we contacted AFSCME and got involved, people would say, ‘Boy, it sure would be great if we had a union, but not enough staff will go for it.’” Gleason said. “So it was a surprise, a really pleasant surprise,

that we had such a huge groundswell of support from just about everybody.”

The campaign also got behind-the-scenes support from the recently formed community group Washington County Ignite, which helped elect the newest member of City Council last November. The group's secretary, Lamar Wise, is a union organizer at Oregon AFSCME.

“What I want people to know is that you *can* do it,” Davis said. “Before this began, I really thought it was pie in the sky. I didn't think we'd succeed.”

The next step will be for workers to form a bargaining committee and negotiate a first union contract with the library.

Except for police and fire fighters, the rest of the City of Hillsboro's workforce remains non-union.

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