Who's on our side?

By Graham Trainor Oregon AFL-CIO President

This strike is so much bigger than one bakery

It should come as no surprise to anyone that workers are fed up, and that they are doing something about it. A quick online search makes this even more obvious. Strikes, shop floor actions, civil disobedience, work stoppages: These are just some of the tools in the toolbox of the working class and the labor movement when we've been pushed too far.

As the nation follows the high profile, high stakes strike at Nabisco (Mondelez is the parent company) that started right here in Portland, where workers in five states are holding the line for a fair contract, this too should not come as a surprise.

Let's take a look at what's been happening at this company known for producing staples like Oreos, Ritz Crackers, and Chips Ahoy cookies for generations.

First of all, this fight for fairness is nothing new for the workers represented by BCTGM (Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers) at Nabisco-Mondelez. For decades, this multiracial group of workers has taken great pride in their craft and in their union jobs that have provided the kind of economic and retirement security our nation needs more of. Unfortunately, this corporate giant that reported over $5.5 billion in profit in the second quarter of 2021 and whose CEO made nearly $17 million in 2020 is overlooking and disrespecting the very workers that have made them so successful throughout the turmoil of the last 18 months. Whether it's the excessive forced overtime hours needed to feed the insatiable appetite for these previously beloved labels, to the pension grab from several years ago, to the unrelenting concessionary demands at a time of record profits, to the steady outsourcing of U.S. jobs, this global, publicly-traded snack food giant has followed the low-road corporate playbook as they continue to squeeze their union-represented workforce.

Workers with experience, integrity, and a commitment to their craft had been pushed too far, and they did something about it.

This nationwide strike that was sparked with the brave members of Portland-based BCTGM Local 364 is just one of the most recent inspiring examples of workers saying "enough is enough."

This summer, members of the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades Local 10 felt disrespected and undervalued, and they did something about it too. Members took a big step, stood strong, and went on strike for a fair slice of the profit that their contractors were enjoying, and they won a life-changing contract.

In late April, faculty at Oregon Institute of Technology and members of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), marked the first faculty-wide strike in Oregon higher education history after attempting to negotiate a first contract for over 500 days, and they won in a victory for all higher education workers in the state.

In March, healthcare workers and members of the Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals (OFNHP/American Federation of Teachers Local 5017) at St. Charles Medical Center in Bend went on strike after nearly two years of bargaining for their first contract, and they won in the middle of a global pandemic.

Earlier in the year, workers at The Rawlin, a memory care facility in Springfield, went on strike to demand recognition as members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 503 and to fight for safe staffing levels and family-supporting wages.

And these are just a few examples of Oregon workers being fed up and doing something about it. Add the ongoing strike at Warrior Met Coal in Alabama, the recent strike at Frito-Lay in Kansas, or the imminent strike authorization votes taking place at John Deere across a number of Midwestern states, and you can start to see something bigger that's going on in the economy.

When workers see other workers taking a brave stand, sacrificing their own economic stability, and fighting for a righteous cause, it has a contagious effect. It's been clear for a long time that our economic system—one that favors wealth over work—is rigged and leaving far too many behind, especially women and workers of color. As more union and non-union workers alike get squeezed and they see news about a strike or a group of workers fighting for fairness, it can be a transformative moment that breeds the confidence to also take a stand. It is truly infectious.

The American people see the connection between thriving communities, safe workplaces, and strong unions. And they see the labor movement as the most effective counterbalance to corporate power in our economy. That's why it was no surprise when a recent Gallup poll showed us that 68% of Americans approve of labor unions, the highest mark in over 50 years, and 77% of young people approve of unions. And that's why over 60 million workers say they would join a union today if they had the opportunity to do so.

The brave workers at Nabisco in Portland and around the country will continue to have the broad, unwavering support of the labor movement, full stop. As this strike has sparked the imagination and the boldness of working people in every corner of the country and across industries, it's also clear that this moment can be one of transformative change, growth, and innovation for our movement and for the entire working class. That is if we truly harness it.

The Oregon AFL-CIO is a 138,000-member-strong federation of labor unions.

At *The Columbian*, no more union

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"It hurts. We put a lot of work into this, and I believe very much in workers' rights.... They lost a lot of really, really talented people because of this behavior."

— Lyndsey Hewitt, union bargaining team

The Columbian pays reporters as little as $17 an hour. Workers unionized in the first place hoping to win a more equitable and transparent pay system, and one that makes it possible to stick around and gain experience reporting on Vancouver and Southwest Washington. But the paper was determined not to give ground.

For 15 months the union bargaining team met monthly for at least six hours with top management and outside attorney Michael Zinser of Nashville. Some sessions lasted two days, eight hours a day, Gillespie said. And in all that time, *The Columbian* never offered any improvement, not even a cost of living increase. It also rejected every union proposal, no matter how small, even a proposal for a union bulletin board. One exception: After rejecting union proposals to improve the company's paid time off policy for holidays, *The Columbian* unilaterally announced a similar improvement—for nonunion employees. The union objected, at which point the company made the improvement for union-represented employees too.

"If they had any respect for the collective bargaining process at all, they would have made counter proposals," Gillespie said, "instead of just telling us that the status quo was good enough."

The Columbian has been owned by the Campbell family since Herbert Campbell bought it in 1921. Its current publisher Ben Campbell is his great-grandson. By email, he said he wouldn't be available to answer questions, and instead emailed an unsigned statement on *Columbian* letterhead that characterized Guild economic proposals as unrealistic. [The union proposed $20 an hour.] The statement also faulted the union for refusing to present its entire contract proposal at once (something pretty rare in union bargaining, and which *The Columbian* didn't do either.)

With over 140 hours of lawyer time just at the bargaining table—plus prep time and travel time and expenses before the pandemic shifted bargaining online—*The Columbian* likely spent over $150,000 just to say no to the union proposals.

With so many supporters gone, and no contract to show for all the effort, the union felt it was time to call it quits.

"This wasn't a decision we made lightly," Gillespie said.

Gillespie said the experience with *The Columbian* speaks to the need for the PRO Act, a proposed labor law reform that passed the U.S. House but is stalled in the U.S. Senate. Under the PRO Act, surface bargaining wouldn't pay off because if two sides failed to reach agreement on a first union contract, it would be decided on by an arbitrator.

"It hurts. We put a lot of work into this," said union bargaining team member Lyndsey Hewitt, who quit her job as a reporter at *The Columbian* the week the union ended. "I wish that management and the Campbells would have been a little more willing to work with workers."

DID YOU KNOW?

Printing press operators at the paper were once represented by GCIU, and the Northwest Labor Press was printed there . . . until they voted to decertify the union in 2002.