

# Health Care vs. Wages

Don't blame public employee unions for impasse

**B**ruce Mackey's letter (7/23) on public employee unions and health care reform resorts to the kind of political misdirection that typifies the current debate.



He's got the first part right. The pols, including Dems, are in the tank with the industry. And he seems to support a single payer system – something I do, too. Then he tells us that public employee unions are the villains in the current situation. Anyone who bothers to check will see that the four largest public employees unions in the country, SEIU, AFSCME, AFT and NEA – all of whom have considerable membership in Oregon – are endorsers of single payer health care options.

The strategic question for labor has been how to get to a single payer system without seriously damaging the hard-won level of worker health benefits.

Anyone who has been a union member at some time over the last 15 years knows that health care is the elephant in the room during negotiations. Unions and their members (through democratic processes I might add) have often decided to trade the size of wage increases to maintain existing health care benefits. The employers says, "That's all there is. Put it in wages, or keep the current health care coverage" (Or more likely, "Put it in wages, or take an even *larger cut* in the health care coverage"). This has not been an easy decision for workers to make. It involves shared sacrifice on the part of union members, some of whom don't need the health care benefits as much as they could use a wage increase.

The real question here is why a single group of workers should be penalized because they decided to sacrifice wage increases for health care benefits for themselves and their families. Many union members with the so-called "Cadillac" plans are not actually highly paid workers. Taxing their health care benefits is not a more progressive way to raise revenues for an alternative system if it decreases the living standards of low-middle income workers disproportionately.

Anyone (including President Obama) who believes that health care reform is not at some level a distributional exercise is going to be sadly disappointed by the reform process. Health care standards will continue to erode (including in union plans) until we stop treating it as a commodity. That is what the single payer initiative is about. In addition, we will all have to pay for the transition. Employers who haven't been providing benefits should be the first to ante up, but higher paid workers will have to as well. However, it shouldn't be based on the marketplace "cost" of each person's health insurance package. Instead it should be derived from some broader, progressive measurement of an individual's ability to pay – means testing of overall income, benefits, and assets.

Unions want single payer not just because it is more equitable, but because it takes health care off the bargaining table, where it has been corrupting the process for two decades. That would allow unions to get back to what they are supposed to do – raise the working and living standards of American workers. Real wages have been stagnant since the late 1970s, and part of the reason is the huge cost of employer paid health insurance.

Blaming the current bottleneck on health care reform on public employees unions only muddies the waters about who is in favor of reform, and who stands in the way of it.

Marcus Widenor lives in Eugene and is an associate professor at the UO Labor Education and Research Center, [www.uoregon.edu/~lerc](http://www.uoregon.edu/~lerc)

## THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### MOVING ON?

On the face of it, your criticisms (news, 7/30) of the (now confirmed) decision by the City Council to relocate the Eugene Police Department north of the Willamette seem self-evident and compelling. However, if this is so, why did the mayor and others who have spoken out so often against sprawl, downtown decay, etc., mount this bandwagon with such enthusiasm?

It would be interesting to know what Jim Torrey and other ostensibly "conservative" opinion leaders say on the subject — or if there are irrefutable environmental, social, economic or even political considerations that justify this apparent rush to put yet another nail in the "Central" Eugene coffin.

Sadly, Eugene, like so many other places, seems to lack effective "solution makers" who are able to craft and implement really constructive, inclusionary visions for the community.

Peter Wengert  
Taos, New Mexico  
(formerly Eugene)

### TIME TO SPEAK OUT

In early June, Oregon Toxics Alliance published a short report on the health burden of the proposed Seneca Sawmill biomass co-generation facility (see [www.oregontoxics.org](http://www.oregontoxics.org)). We presented these concerns to staff members of the U.S. Environmental Justice Agency, the Oregon Department of Energy, Mayor Piercy and Councilor Andrea Ortiz, Lane Regional Air Pollution Agency (LRAPA), consultants, the manager for the Seneca power plant and members of impacted neighborhoods in West Eugene.

The federal EPA has expressed a firm interest in helping residents of west Eugene convene a stakeholder process to address the negative health threats from the air pollution caused by the plant. The facilitated discussion will allow for open dialogue about making a better plan to mitigate and address air quality issues in Lane County. This type of community

stakeholder dialogue is not possible under the Air Pollution Discharge Permit process that LRAPA is currently undertaking. Our community needs a way to bring up issues such as air pollution monitoring, low-income home weatherization, public health surveys and reducing air pollution.

The application submitted by Seneca states that the plant will emit nearly 500 tons of air pollutants and toxins per year. Many of these pollutants are known to cause cancer, heart disease and respiratory illness. The neighborhoods downwind of the plant, including Bethel, River Road and Trainsong, will bear a disproportional impact to their health and wellbeing.

OTA urges the community, particularly people living in west Eugene, to write a letter or email to your city and county representatives and LRAPA. Tell them that it is important to protect public health and be a willing participant in discussions about environmental health facilitated by the EPA. The deadline is Aug. 14.

Lisa Arkin, Executive Director  
Oregon Toxics Alliance  
Eugene

### THE PUBIC HAIR DID IT

Regarding Eve Cienfuegos' letter (7/16) on the Oregon Country Fair: I went to three fairs in the 1980s. I stopped when a friend found a pubic hair on his black bean tostada. A bit traumatic.

The fair is the same crap every year: hippies, hippie wannabes, bad music, overpriced crafts, doubtful hygiene and lots of dust.

Like the pretentious Springfield Boiler Festival (now extinct), the Bohemia Mining Days, the Eugene Celebration, it's phony crap.

I was teened and weened on the '60s and '70s, It was shit then and still is.

Greg Hume  
Creswell

### HOLDING GOLD OK

Roy Keene is wrong when he states: "It is still illegal for private citizens to own

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