



news

Shout to the Top

TWO UNIONS NEGOTIATING CONTRACTS WITH UO SIT IN, RALLY AT JOHNSON HALL

By Henry Houston

After nearly 30 minutes of hearing about the university's contracts proposed to classified workers from speakers at a union rally in front of the University of Oregon's Johnson Hall, attendees marched through the building, their chants echoing throughout the marble halls: "UO works because we do" and "What do we want? A fair contract! When do we want it? Now!"

The rally, titled "Solidarity Against Austerity," was collaboration of the Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation and Service Employees International Union Local 503 (SEIU). The rally capped off a weeklong sit-in campaign conducted by the GTFF. The two events were influenced by what the unions say are poor contracts offered by the UO that gut health care and wages.

The rally featured union speakers throughout the state, as well as the SEIU 503's executive director, Melissa Unger, who told attendees, "It is you who make this campus run."

"If universities want to be a place where all students — white, black and brown — have a chance to get a degree, no matter their background, then they must invest in

the frontline workers who make it happen," Unger said at the rally. Attendees responded with cheers.

Unger added that management was respecting workers by cutting workers' health care and wages.

"When you have people making under \$30,000 a year working alongside people who make over \$500,000, it's not just about money; it's about priorities," she said. "These are choices the university is making."

The possibility of a union strike also came up during the rally as a way to demand respect from management.

Rob Fullmer, an employee at Portland State University and a member of SEIU 503, told attendees that they should be ready for a strike and to tell co-workers to prepare for a strike because university management has chosen to not prioritize workers.

"Regardless of what happens in the Legislature, we have to be ready to strike," he said. "We don't want to strike. It's not a good look, but we have to be ready."

The last time a union at the UO went on strike was in November 2014 when the GTFF went on strike over paid leave for sick for illness or childbirth. *Eugene Weekly* received a heavily redacted invoice from the UO on the legal costs from the impasse. Local law firm Harrang Long and Gary Rudnick charged the UO \$13,167 in legal fees for the month of December 2014.

The GTFF and the UO have been in mediation for three sessions now, since neither side accepted the other's negotiations.

The UO wants to cut down on its contributions to health care as a way to artificially inflate paychecks to compete with Association of American Universities, the UO previously told *EW*.

For graduate employees (GEs), it means gutting a benefit that allows diversity in graduate students.

Ellen Gillooly-Kress, who's a Ph.D. student in the theatre arts program, is a part of the GTFF's health care trust group, which manages the health care plan.

"There are no plans under their proposed budget cut that has the same amount of benefits without us

having a deductible, twice, three times bigger," she says.

The UO proposed a plan that would put a dollar amount on how much the university contributes to the GTFF's health care rather than the current 95 percent contribution. UO would use the difference to inflate GE paychecks to match the GTFF's request for a living wage. However, individual GEs would spend much of the paycheck to pay for an increased health care premium.

Gillooly-Kress says she was a part of the health care trust when it negotiated with health care providers, saving the UO almost \$1 million. She adds that she feels personally attacked when the UO's negotiators have said during bargaining that it's up to the GTFF's trust to find a health care plan that works under the UO's proposed contributions.

"There's literally no plan on the face of this planet for the amount of money that they are cutting that will protect our members in the way that our health insurance has been protecting them," she says. "Our position strongly is no cuts to health insurance, full stop."

Gillooly-Kress says her department would be decimated over the UO's proposed health care plan. She says out of the nine GEs in the department, six of them have partners and there are six children.

Alexandra Garner, a Ph.D. student in the English department, tells *EW* that health care is important to her since the GTFF health insurance is the best she's ever had. She adds that she has a congenital spinal defect that requires constant maintenance to keep her from being in chronic pain. In addition to offering access to mental health resources, the GTFF's current health insurance plan is a necessity for her.

And taking health care away from GEs is a recipe for collective action.

"If you try to take our health care, people who don't normally care about union stuff, they're going to start caring," she says. ■