

# Retirees Are Bright Spot In Lobbying Effort That Gained Mixed Results

*Editor's Note:* Prior to the 1981 legislative session, a new direction for the OPEU lobbying effort was developed, requiring large-scale member participation. While the level of member participation did not reach our potential, the legislative lobbying that members did do—testimony, phone calling campaigns, letter writing campaigns and visiting legislators—proved successful in many areas.

This 61st Legislature, which was characterized by fiscal restraint and slashing of government services, can fairly be called the toughest session public employes have faced as a special interest group. Despite these conditions, OPEU's lobbying effort was able to make some significant gains. In addition, member lobbying helped thwart some legislation that would have had negative impact on public employes.

On these two pages we have provided a capsulized look at the measures from the 1981 session that are of concern to public employes.

## Retirement Legislation

Retirees had their best legislative session ever. The major impact they had on many pieces of legislation is testimony to the effectiveness of a member-oriented lobbying effort.

- SB 494—** Allows all public employes to retire at age 58—or at age 55 with 30 years service—with full PERS benefits.
- SB 148—** Provides most public retirees with a higher final average salary upon which retirement benefits are determined. This new method will allow employes to use any or all of their final-year salary in computing their average.
- SB 579—** Enables retired public employes to participate in group dental insurance, as well as group health insurance.
- SB 843—** Provides a cost of living adjustment for retirees whose benefits were below those received by employes who retired more recently from similar positions with equal years of service. COLA will provide these retirees with parity.
- SB 482—** Allows public employes to recover lost credits (due to interruptions in public employment) by repaying withdrawn contributions to PERS.
- SJR 34—** Allows an employe who selects a lump-sum retirement to put those dollars in retirement plans that allow deferment of tax payments.

## Labor Legislation

The House and Senate Labor Committees worked diligently to develop more favorable labor laws and to protect gains made in previous legislative sessions. However, the climate in the House of Representatives was not particularly favorable to labor in general or to public employes specifically. The clear message to public employes is that they will have to work hard in the next elections to change this climate.

- HB 2578—** This so-called "right-to-work" measure would have severely limited the rights of workers to collectively bargain. The House labor committee dealt this measure a swift defeat by tabling it without a hearing.
- HB 2141—** Would have eliminated factfinding in segments of public employe collective bargaining; was defeated on the House floor.
- HB 2550—** The plant closure bill, which would have given employes and communities advance notice of plant closures so they could make other economic plans, was defeated on the House floor.
- HB 2483—** Allows arbitration panels to make decisions retroactive to the expiration date of the immediately preceding contract, regardless of whether the arbitration began before July 1. Under the old law, management often stalled negotiations so that arbitration could not start before July 1 and thus prevent retroactive decisions.
- HB 2484—** Increases unemployment benefits from 55 percent to 64 percent of the average weekly wage; eliminates the eight week delay in eligibility of a spouse who quits their job because of the other spouse's job transfer.

## Budget/Taxation Legislation

Budget and taxation were the overriding elements of the 61st legislative session. Governor Atiyeh proposed a budget that was \$240 million out of balance. The Legislature, in trying to meet its legal responsibility to balance the budget, cut the governor's proposal more than 10 percent (\$150 million), by reducing expenses in nearly all agencies and by completely eliminating some agencies.

Salary and benefits negotiated for state employes by OPEU will cause an additional impact on agency budgets. Because of legislative "underfunding," additional layoffs will be required to fund part of the negotiated raises.

Legislators moved slowly on the politically-sensitive issue of taxation, but ended the session by increasing revenues by a projected \$167 million. Major revenue raising measures (and their projected savings) were:

- HB 2584—** Postponed increasing the personal income tax exemption until 1983 (\$77 million).
- HB 3090—** Increased the cigarette tax by 7¢, to 16¢ per pack (\$41 million).
- HB 2184—** Improves cash management of the General fund (\$35 million).



OPEU members lobbied on many fronts during the 61st Legislature. Clockwise from upper left, retirees met with Governor Atiyeh; Board members spent a day at the Capitol lobbying legislators; AFS employes lobbied hard against creation of a senior services division; a cross section of employes met with

legislators and their staff urging a review of the state classification system; and OPEU members turned out in mass to lobby at a hearing on increasing parking fees (center photo).

## New Journal Begins Political Campaign

Three facts became very clear during the 1981 legislature:

- 1) Public employes are not considered a strong special interest group by Oregon legislators;
- 2) Public employes showed that they can be an effective lobbying force (this was particularly evident in some areas of retirement legislation); and
- 3) Public employes must build a strong political action organization now. This organization must be statewide in scope and must make an impact on local, county and state elections if it is to be an effective force in the next legislative session.

OPEU's first step in establishing a forceful political action organization will be a bi-monthly political journal. This journal will feature news and analysis of Oregon political activity. It will tell you what all segments of OPEU's political action organization are doing. And, it will offer advice and insight on how to organize, how to maximize political impact and how to build clout.

This new journal will be called *Citizen Action by public employes*. It will be mailed to your home in mid-September.

The first issue will include:

- An assessment of the 1981 legislative session;

- A look at the legislators who worked the hardest for public employes and those who worked the hardest against public employes;
- An analysis of where shrinking tax dollars are going in Oregon, what fiscal restraints public employes can expect in the near future and what public employes can do to prevent continuing budgetary losses;
- An assessment of OPEU's political assets and liabilities, its potential political strength and what must be done before public employes will become a force to be reckoned with in Oregon politics; and
- Political rumours that are popping up around the state.

## Affirmative Action Legislation

OPEU lobbying efforts and legislators' attention to potential inequities in the state classification system served as a springboard to passage of several affirmative action measures and the promise of additional review during the interim.

- HJR 38—** Called for a legislative review of the archaic state classification system. It is likely that this review will be included in a list of topics for work by a legislative interim committee this fall.
- HB 2965—** Requires state agencies, as part of their budget presentation, to renew affirmative action objectives.
- HB 2966—** Requires affirmative action objectives to become a measure of management effectiveness.
- HB 3242—** Extends affirmative action goals—in all branches of State government—to services and programs provided and to the awarding of contracts.

## Workers' Compensation Legislation

Except for the rate-making process, no massive reforms occurred in workers' compensation laws, even though Oregon has the highest rates in the nation and benefits that are nowhere near the best. Three groups are primarily responsible for this situation: attorneys and doctors whose practices center around workers' compensation cases and insurance companies who find it cheaper to settle claims out of court. All three groups conduct strong lobbying efforts in Salem.

- HB 2600—** Sets new rates for various classes of workers' compensation injuries and increases the maximum amount of weekly compensation. This measure also expands the use of Callahan Center's rehabilitation facilities to employes with disabilities that are not job related and allows for rehabilitation of employes from the private sector.

## Measures With Negative Impact

Many bills that were counterproductive to the interests of OPEU members were thwarted as a result of membership involvement in the lobbying effort. However, not all bills of this type could be stopped—SB 955, which passed in the final hours of the session, is a good example.

- HB 2828—** Would have phased out Eastern Oregon State Hospital and Training Center.
- SB 10—** Would have eliminated state weighmasters as a bargaining unit.
- HB 3286—** Would have reorganized Children Services Division employes under county jurisdiction.
- SB 136—** Prior to the 1981 session, State law and an Attorney General's opinion required fees to be assessed in all State parking lots across the State. The implementation of statewide fees was imminent. A new law, which was compromise legislation, restricts fees to congested areas and sets the fee rate, not on a "market rate" (as the State proposed), but upon actual costs. While the bill is an improvement, it is by no means perfect.
- SB 955—** Establishes a senior services division. Passed with mixed reviews in the final hours of the Legislature; was strongly supported by the United Seniors; OPEU members in AFS expressed concern for service delivery due to decentralization.

## Ineffective OPEU Lobbying

Two pieces of legislation that failed to gain passage—OPEU-sponsored HB 2878 and HB 2618—are good examples of measures that may have done better had OPEU members mounted a more effective lobbying effort. Both bills failed because legislators received misinformation and a mixed message from employes. In the future, OPEU members must make certain that their lobbying efforts are not wasted due to a lack of coordination.

- HB 2878—** Would have allowed PERS participants to receive beneficial home mortgages.
- HB 2618—** Would have required socially responsible investments by PERS.

## Miscellaneous Legislation

- SB 5543—** Continues budget outlays for the Bargaining Unit Benefits Board (BUBB).
- HB 3072—** Would have eliminated the two-part ballot in representation elections for higher education. Failed in the House 26-27.