

Confidence Builds at Convention



Outgoing OPEU officers—June Blakley, secretary-treasurer; Pete Petry, vice president and Deb Bolton, president—listen to speaker during General Council.

Less than one year after a major internal reorganization and affiliating with the Service Employees International Union, OPEU has put additional teeth into its move to become one of the strongest unions in the state.

At the 39th General Council, delegates made five major commitments:

- Establish a grassroots political organization and raise a larger political action fund;
- Form a committee to develop a strike fund and guidelines for a strike policy;
- Further OPEU's alliance with the state labor movement and join the Oregon AFL-CIO;
- Accept the legislative challenge to control insurance costs by implementing cost-containment programs; and
- Increase the rebates received by smaller locals.

Delegates underscored their desire in these areas by electing Steve Green to the presidency. Green, a Salem right-of-way agent who has been one of the prime movers behind reorganizing along bargaining unit lines, ran on a platform stressing the five issues on which delegates made a major commitment.

He defeated incumbent vice-president D. H. "Pete" Petry for the top spot in one of the closest races in the union's history. Two-term incumbent president Deb Bolton could not constitutionally seek re-election.

Following Green into office were two other ODOT employees—John Clapp, a Portland bridgetender, as vice-president and Carol Laizure-

Election analysis, photos & overview of resolutions on 6, 7

Jellison, a journeyman silkscreen sign printer, as secretary-treasurer.

Green said his first actions as president will be "to help the rank and file realize the strength of its leadership, to become more involved in the Oregon labor movement—including joining the Oregon AFL-CIO—and start building a grassroots political organization.

"The delegates made the commitments they had to make to provide our members with the strong union they were demanding," Green said. "Now we need to ally ourselves with the Oregon AFL-CIO and build the type of grassroots political organization that labor needs. As the second largest union in the state and potentially the largest union in the AFL-CIO, our contribution in this area could be substantial."

"In the past, OPEU's political efforts have largely consisted of campaign contributions and staff lobbying at the Legislature," Green added. "In the future, we will continue to do those things, plus work from the bottom of the political structure. That means walking the streets, knocking on doors and finding political candidates that will help public employees."

To underscore their desire for increased political clout, delegates approved a voluntary \$1-a-month minimum payroll checkoff. The checkoff monies will be used to

bolster OPEU's political action fund.

Proceeds from the checkoff could generate as much as \$24,000 per biennium, according to Dennis Koho, an OPEU member who works for Senate majority leader Del Isham. The checkoff will be in addition to the current 25¢ per month, per member, that goes to the political action fund. In the last biennium, this deduction raised over \$80,000 and was spent on local and legislative candidates.

Stormy debate arose over how to raise money for a strike fund. Most delegates balked at a proposal to create a fund by immediately increasing dues by \$1 per month. After raising dues last year and promising no additional increases this year, delegates feared such move would have a negative impact on current elections to deauthorize fair share.

Instead, delegates appointed a special committee to study and make recommendations on establishing a strike fund and to recommend a strike policy.

A major thrust of the annual convention was aimed at membership concern over skyrocketing insurance costs.

After listening to insurance industry, medical and legislative experts, delegates instructed OPEU members on the Bargaining Unit Benefits Board (BUBB) to institute statewide "wellness programs," to

look into incentives for staying healthy and to issue reports on possible legislative changes in insurance and on ways to get greater flexibility from negotiated insurance dollars.

Green also played a large role in continuing internal reorganization, by pushing a resolution to increase rebates to smaller locals.

The proposal, which was authored by Green, will generate approximately \$3,000 to \$4,000 for small locals, according to OPEU business manager Ralph Jull. The money will come largely from the biggest locals—ODOT and AFS.

Because ODOT had more delegates than any other local, the key to passing this resolution was gaining ODOT support. Some delegates in the ODOT caucus said Green was primarily responsible for convincing their caucus to back the resolution.

"Under the old system, many of our smaller locals did not have enough money to effectively organize as bargaining units," Green explained. "Now they will."

Perhaps the best indicator of OPEU's growing strength though, was the sense of solidarity and comradery among the union's divergent interest groups.

"This was the first year in recent memory that we entered this convention without internal discord or the threat of external attack," said Thomas Gallagher, OPEU executive director. "The fact that we left General Council with an even greater sense of unity is testimony to the growing maturity of this union."