

# OPEU's Metamorphosis: A New Political Power?

**Metamorphosis: Any marked change, as in character, appearance, or condition.**

—Webster's New World Dictionary

The term seems to fit the Oregon Public Employees Union, the state's second-largest public employe union.

A year ago, the organization—then known as the Oregon State Employees Association—was rocked by the indictment of its executive director on federal mail fraud charges. Membership was sagging, internal strife was embarrassingly evident, and rival unions were making inroads on the association's turf.

nipping the hand that fed it.

One would hardly call the still-fledgling OPEU a powerhouse in the Oregon labor movement or a force at the state legislature. Yet there are signs that OPEU, in shedding its skin, is actually beginning to sound, smell and act like a union.

During its annual convention last week in Portland, OPEU delegates approved five actions they hope will increase their clout and help boost membership.

- A voluntary \$1-a-month check-off to finance a special campaign chest with which to support candidates for legislative and local office.

Systems Division and Water Resources Department—voted to reject the imposition of "fair share" dues.

Oregon's collective bargaining law allows unions to collect monthly fees, in lieu of dues, from non-members who belong to a bargaining unit the union represents. However, such arrangements can be vetoed by majority vote of the bargaining unit.

OPEU won a victory on fair share in the central bargaining contract recently hammered out with the state. The agreement allows OPEU to collect fair share payments at each of the 44 state agencies covered by the contract unless workers in those agencies decide otherwise.

However, state law also gives workers a 90-day period, which expires Nov. 1, to "deauthorize" the agreement for their agencies.

Three agencies—Veterans' Affairs, Justice and Agriculture—will be voting on the Fair Share issue this month. Together, they employ about 1,000 non-management workers. The three agencies that have already voted out fair share represented about one-third as many.

From OPEU's standpoint, a vote to deauthorize fair share amounts to a slap in the face for the union. More critical to the union is an agency's vote to "decertify" OPEU as its bargaining agent.

Decertification means that workers in that particular unit are free to hook up with another union or opt for no representation at all.

Decertification votes can't be held until the last 90 days before expiration of a contract. That means OPEU won't take its real litmus test until

**"OPEU is on track in rebuilding its public image, shoring up its membership rolls and strengthening its flanks against raids by other unions."**

OSEA's public image was badly stained and its bargaining clout was perceived as minimal. Staff members admit now they doubted whether the association could survive, especially with wage negotiations approaching against a backdrop of a tight state budget.

A year later, OSEA has done more than just change its name.

It has cleaned house by electing a new slate of officers headed by president Steve Green, a state Highway Division worker in Salem. And it has picked a new executive director, soft-spoken Thomas Gallagher, to succeed the flamboyant Morton Shapiro.

More important, OPEU is on track in rebuilding its public image, shoring up its membership rolls and strengthening its flanks against raids by other unions.

It's too early to say the union has succeeded on all fronts. Problems remain, especially those related to money, membership and morale. But it's fair to say the 14,287-member union is making progress.

The changes have come largely as a result of a pivotal decision last November to end the association's independent status and affiliate with the Service Employees International Union, one of the 10 largest unions within the national AFL-CIO.

From its founding in 1943 until last year, OSEA had largely been regarded as something of a toothless tiger. It had a reputation of rarely

- Establishment of a committee to study the idea of a strike fund.

- Reduction of membership dues for workers who earn less than \$500 a month.

- Continued funding of a committee to study ways of educating and recruiting clerical workers—the group of workers who traditionally are the lowest paid and least represented in the union.

- Holding of general business conventions in odd-numbered years only instead of annually. Aside from saving money, the change could result in bonafide political conventions during even-numbered years, during which candidates of both parties would come to court the union's support.

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Clearly, the potential is there for OPEU to join the ranks of Oregon political heavyweights. But such clout won't be achieved overnight, despite the euphoric feeling that infected delegates to the Portland convention.

Anyone who thinks otherwise need only look at the results of three "deauthorization" elections held during August and September. Workers in three state agencies—the Public Utility Commissioner, Data

March or April of 1983.

If the union is serious about becoming a political force at the Legislature, and in local campaigns, it must first reverse the string of losses on fair share votes.

Failing that, one can't help but wonder whether metamorphosis works both ways.

**George Rede  
Reporter, Salem Statesman-Journal**

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## Something For Nothing

There is a movement afoot to rescind "fair share." That is, to reject the portion of the OPEU contract which requires union fees to be paid by all members of the bargaining unit.

Those that protest the requirements call it "taxation without their fair share." The fact of the matter is these employes have been free-loading off the rest of us, and would be doing so once again if deauthorization succeeds. A better description of the situation would be called "representation without taxation."

State law requires OPEU to represent all employes in the bargaining unit. OPEU, or more accurately, we who pay dues, have been footing the bill for everyone. Everyone receives the benefits of the improved wages, insurance and working conditions negotiated by our team. They also receive legal assistance in pursuing grievances and other union services.

Anyone who would sign a petition to rescind "fair share" should consider the following: We (OPEU

members) have already been representing everyone. It would be to their benefit to become a member and have a voice in the union. And we will all benefit from a bigger, stronger union. I urge employes to support "fair share" by not signing a petition to deauthorize "fair share," to remove their signatures if they have already signed and by voting "No" if a deauthorization election is held.

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