



# Leadership Column

by Kathie Best

SEIU Local 503, OPEU President

## Something worth fighting for...

**Dear Fellow Members,**

Healthcare is an issue that is so large, so complex and so expensive that it is almost beyond our comprehension.

But, the birth of my first granddaughter, Tessa Maxine, on February 1, reminded me that she is what the healthcare debate is all about. There are many parents and grandparents in our membership who may have had the same realization. As we age, we must worry about the health of our parents, too. Others may have chronic illnesses that need on-going attention.

The members of our bargaining teams have struggled for years to maintain accessible and affordable healthcare. Their broad knowledge of healthcare issues is passed along to the membership so that we, appropriately, can assist in critical decisions that affect our health insurance. We also have a tremendous resource in Leslie Frane, our new Executive Director, who has spent the past 14 years with SEIU Local 1199 New England, which represents 20,000 public and private healthcare workers. We welcome her to our Local and look forward to learning from her.

Our health and how we will pay for care is something many of us worry about everyday, whether it's routine examinations, prescription drug costs or a catastrophic illness. Members reveal this in conversations with one another and SEIU Local 503, OPEU leaders. Ask someone about future DAS and Higher Ed contract negotiations and the worry is whether our raise will be eaten up by premium increases. Our local government and nonprofit locals are facing this battle as well. Pick up the newspaper and find "strike" in the headlines; healthcare is one of the strike issues.

More and more of the state budget goes to cover rising healthcare costs - and not just for state workers. The K-12 education budget is absorbing spiraling increases in healthcare

costs. The inmate population in our state prisons is growing older with its attendant health concerns. The rising costs the Oregon Health Plan faces was the subject of considerable discussion in the public hearings the Governor held on February 14 and 15.

The United States is alone among so-called "first world" nations, in that it does not provide health insurance for all of its citizens. In Europe and Japan, this isn't a matter of whether the social democrats or the conservative party is in power; in their view, it's what civilized nations do.

*Our health and how we will pay for care is something many of us worry about every day...it's about our children and our grandchildren; it's about our families and ourselves; it's about money in our pockets.*

SEIU Local 503, OPEU and SEIU nationally have been leaders in pushing for health security for all. Here in Oregon, SEIU is committed to taking on the big issues, including ones that provide benefits to more than just our membership. We've been a leader since the mid-70's in the area of healthcare. With the formation of the Bargaining Unit Benefits Board (BUBB), we were able to control the design of healthcare plans in order to keep costs low, to provide coverage to all bargaining unit members with no out-of-paycheck premium charges and to insist on a certain level of wellness participation. More recently, we've won representation of homecare workers, thus improving the stability of a service that will enable all Oregonians to continue living in our own homes and to remain independent as we grow older.

Here's what's important to know about the Health Security Campaign: It involves an issue that we all feel acutely and personally; it's about

our children and our grandchildren; it's about our families and ourselves; it's about money in our pockets.

This is not just an Oregon Campaign, but an SEIU national campaign. Oregon is one of the first states targeted to receive New Strength and Unity dollars for this effort. SEIU International recognizes that in order to give the national government the political will to address this issue in a meaningful way, some states must act first. SEIU Local 503, OPEU has made a commitment to the improvement of healthcare in Oregon.

*It has been thrilling to watch my granddaughter, Tessa Maxine, being born and experiencing the first days of her life. At Union meetings and at the workplace, at the Capitol and in the media,*

*in the days and weeks and months...perhaps years...to come, as we talk about the Health Security Campaign, we'll talk about millions, even billions, of dollars. We'll talk about "issues" and say they are part of a "fight" or a "struggle."*



Kathie and Tessa

But, behind it all is a very gentle thing, a newborn baby, or someone with a dreadful disease who is frightened and feels alone. It involves a homecare client, whose mind is lucid and focused, but whose body has fused into immobility or an older person fearing they can't afford to maintain their dignity in their last years.

In part, our Health Security Campaign ought to be about pride; in ourselves, in our state and our nation, and in our Union that, once again, is taking a leadership role on this issue.

**In Strength and Unity,**

*Kathie*