

Defending Our PERS

What can SEIU Local 503, OPEU members do about the attacks to public employees and the Public Employee Retirement System (PERS) that have pervaded the media recently?

A great deal, really. First, we must make sure that the public and lawmakers form opinions and make decisions based on the facts. Attacking PERS is good politics because the misperceptions are so strong and the debate lacks context. Letters to the editor and to legislators are effective tools with which we can help shape the public debate.

- ◆ Don't let any inaccuracy in the media go unchallenged. Whether it's in an editorial, a quote from a politician or a listener or a guest on a talk show, phone the reporter or the talk show with your version of the facts right away or put them into a letter to the editor.
- ◆ Write a letter to the editor describing the value your work brings to Oregon. We know the value of the work we do, but the public will remain unaware unless we tell them.

- ◆ Write letters to your legislators as well. Now is a good time, since the legislature is out of session, so legislators are not getting a lot of mail.
- ◆ Organize your work area or take time at a local meeting to write several letters on PERS to your local newspaper editor. Letters should be short, so if we submit several letters, we can cover a lot of ground.

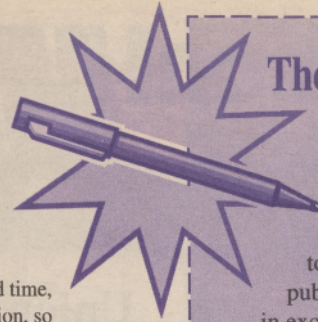
Remember, your views on PERS are legitimate and deserve to be respected. If you need help or information or sample letters to the editor, contact your organizer or the communications office at the Union Headquarters in Salem.

It's important to realize that we can affect public attitudes about PERS. If we don't, we may find that decisions affecting our retirement will be made by people wanting to use it for their political advantage — and our disadvantage.

PERS Facts

As you talk to your neighbor over the fence or at church, respond to outrages on talk radio or write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper, here are some facts about the Public Employee Retirement System (PERS) that you should keep in mind.

- ◆ Many factors, not PERS alone, have caused the financial hardships that state and local governments are experiencing. Ballot Measure 5, the declining economy, and rising costs of materials, equipment, and insurance have squeezed public budgets, too. It is irresponsible and unfair to blame PERS — and, thus, public employees — for budget cuts throughout the state.
- ◆ PERS is the primary carrot that state and local governments have to keep our valuable and qualified employees on the job. Here's the tradeoff we agreed to when we took these jobs: In exchange for below-market wages, we would receive a secure retirement. We've fulfilled our part of that bargain, and it's simply wrong for the state to renege on its part.
- ◆ Public employee wages have failed to keep up with the cost of living. For state workers, wage increases since 1990 totaled less than half the rate of inflation. This means that state workers' purchasing power has declined significantly.
- ◆ The declining economy and Oregon's reliance on the income tax have resulted in three special legislative sessions to close nearly a \$1 billion budget gap. By contrast, the total estimated PERS shortfall is barely a quarter of that amount.
- ◆ While we acknowledge some real problems with the PERS system, most of the changes being discussed would be illegal or ineffective. Some proposed changes would face immediate court challenge and would likely be overturned. Other proposed changes would have no effect for decades, because they would only affect the retirement benefits of employees hired in the future.
- ◆ Only a small fraction of PERS retirees receive the stock-market inflated pension checks highlighted in recent headlines.



The Power of the Pen

We can help counter attacks on PERS by publicizing the value of our work, emphasizing our dedication to that work and reminding the public that the PERS pickup was in exchange for a prolonged wage freeze following years of below-market wages.

Hints for writing letters to the editor:

- ◇ Describe the value of your job to the public;
- ◇ Discuss how you contribute to Oregonians' health and safety;
- ◇ Explain how you care for those who can't care for themselves;
- ◇ Explain how your job contributes to the economy;
- ◇ Tell readers how the public needs and wants the services you provide;
- ◇ Describe how your work may be dangerous or require expert skills;
- ◇ Discuss the size of your caseload;
- ◇ Use specific, true-life examples;
- ◇ Don't attack and don't use mockery; be factual and clear.

Remember, if you work in the business office, you still contribute to public services. You're part of that program. The office needs to run smoothly; public money needs to be accurately accounted for. You may want to start a sentence with, "I'm part of a program that . . ." and then describe the service.

All letters MUST:

- ◇ Be signed by the writer, as well as have his or her name printed on it.
- ◇ Stay within the word limit.
- ◇ Include the writer's address and daytime phone number. Neither will be published, but an e-mail address will be, allowing you to see what your readers have to say.