A Special Labor Day Brings University Workers a Fair Contract

An overwhelming 93% of OUS members have ratified a new two-year agreement covering 4,000 classified workers in the Oregon University System represented by SEIU Local 503.

The agreement, finalized on the Friday of Labor Day weekend after eight grueling months of negotiations amid plans for a system-wide strike, was unanimously recommended by the bargaining committee and an assembly of elected bargaining delegates.

"It is not perfect," the team said in its message to members. "That was never in the cards this time around given the economy. But in the face of management's original demands for unlimited furlough days, a pay cut, and a full two-year step freeze, we have won an agreement that meets our basic goal of fairness. And while our deal with the Chancellor does not mirror the DAS settlement in every last detail, it is substantially equivalent to the agreement that DAS workers reached with the Governor six weeks ago."

Here are the basic terms:

- The union protected fully paid health care premiums for full-time employees and froze premiums for the part-time plan. Oregon is now one of only two states in the country where full time state employees don't pay for part of their health care premiums.
- Instead of management's plan for a two-year step freeze, we won back steps in the second year of the contract.
- Management withdrew proposals for unlimited furloughs and an across-the-board pay cut!
- In provisions similar but not identical to those in the DAS contract, workers will have eight to sixteen furlough days over the biennium.

"Beyond a doubt, members' unity and activism has gotten us this far," the committee told members. "From the outset, the OUS negotiators made it clear that they would try to use the current budget squeeze as an excuse to separate us from other state workers - now and in the future. But we said 'NO!' -- no to a pay cut, no to unlimited furloughs, no to a two-year step freeze. "Members turned out in force on every campus on bargaining days there. We phoned and wrote the Chancellor. We engaged campus presidents. We came to rallies, appealed to legislators and sent letters to editors. And in the end we signed strike pledge cards in such numbers that the OUS administration decided to cut a deal."

2009 OUS Bargaining Team: (Back row L-R) Corlyn Caspers (OIT), Deanna Berglund (UofO), Greg Marks (PSU), Nat Elder (WOU), Mark Uhden (OSU), Rich Peppers (SEIU) – (Front row L-R) Marc Nisenfeld (Chair / PSU), Bob Sexton (SOU), Paul McKenna (SEIU)

Union members expressed concern with a report by former University of Oregon President, Dave Frohnmeyer calling for the three largest campuses - Oregon, Oregon State and Portland State - to become semi-autonomous corporations. "Our vision should be an affordable and accessible competitive public university system that serves all Oregonian," UofO Local President Lois Yoshishige wrote to the Eugene Register-Guard. "How we accomplish that will necessarily involve careful consideration and input from a great many sources, including frontline workers like me..."

Child Care Contract Was "Only Part of the Battle"

Over 99% of members voting have said yes to a new two-year contract covering family child care providers represented by SEIU Local 503.

The vote at regional meetings and by mail ratifies a contract that not only preserves Oregon's pioneering program in employment-related day care, but for the first time offers providers a path to affordable health coverage.

"Settling a contract was only part of the battle," said Portia Moye, a Portland-based child care provider who chaired the bargaining team. "Our work helped protect services for more than 3,500 low-income working families and saved an estimated 1,800 provider jobs. The team unanimously recommended approval to union members."

Highlights of the contract include:

- Maintaining rates at current levels, which is crucial to retaining dependable providers who care for low-income children in safe, reliable homes and is a real victory in these economic times.
- Continued funding for training.
- Mandatory paid orientations for new child care providers that include a union presentation.
- A grievance procedure with steps and timelines for resolving disputes.
- Governor Ted Kulongoski's support for SEIU to develop and administer a health insurance plan for child care workers that's funded under the State's Family Health Insurance Assistance Program starting in 2010.

Homecare Pact Protects Prior Gains Despite a 'Difficult Bargaining Year'

Members have ratified a new two-year contract covering nearly 10,000 SEIU Local 503 homecare workers that protects historic gains in paid health coverage made in prior years and preserves pay rates and working conditions that have made Oregon a national leader in community homecare.

"I'm so excited that in a most difficult bargaining year we were able to negotiate an increase in the State's contribution to cover rising health care costs," said Beverly Mackey, a Lincoln City homecare worker who chaired the SEIU 503 elected bargaining committee. "We have protected services for our clients and won a fair contract for our members."

The new contract, retroactive to July 1, 2009, capped an often tense eight months of bargaining and lobbying that started with a successful effort to reverse legislative budget proposals that threatened severe cuts to client care.

Members and allies converged on the Capitol in Salem to convince legislators to preserve Oregon's 30-year role as a national pioneer in applying Medicaid funds to pay for home-based health care for seniors and people with disabilities. Their argument became all the more convincing after federal stimulus dollars increased the federal government's contribution to the costs of Oregon's homecare program.

That fight won, SEIU 503 members turned their attention to bargaining that began Feb. 2 and focused largely on health coverage. For months, state negotiators refused to commit to covering premium increases for represented homecare workers who receive fully-paid employee-only medical, dental and vision coverage if they work 80 hours a month.

Members contended that increases were likely to price many workers out of the program. Eventually, after homecare workers across the state weighed in applying pressure, the State relented, agreeing to cover up to 11% of any premium increase in the first year and 10% in the second year. That amounts to an eventual increase of $1,826 a year in state contributions to homecare worker health care.

Oregon homecare workers, the first in the nation to be granted the right to form a union by the state's voters in a ballot referendum in 1999, negotiated their first contract in 2001. Hourly care providers earn $10.20 an hour, 24-hour live-in care providers, $4.55 an hour.

The new contract contained several other improvements important to many members, including one provision allowing round-the-clock workers to take paid leave in 4 - 12 hour increments instead of a full day at a time.

Homecare Bargaining Team members Elisha Burton, Phyllis Wills and BG Gray add their signatures to the contract during the Signing Celebration Dinner held at Red Lion Inn in Salem on November 6.

"We have maintained health care and wages and taken no cuts despite the economy," said committee vice chair Virginia Griensewic, a homecare worker from Tangent in central Oregon. "The Bargaining Team unanimously recommended a yes vote."

In addition to Mackey and Griensewic, the committee included Elisha Burton of Cornelius, LJ Denney of Camas Valley, Patrick Featherstone of Salem, Kay Foster of Hermiston, Susan Gallagher of Dallas, BG Gray of Portland, Carolynn Kohout of Hillsboro, Lee Meyers of Central Point, Irina Nasteka of Portland, Anita Pecoff of Bend, Alice Redding of Rainier, Adam Riggs of Eugene, Bobbie Sotin of North Bend, Joy'e Willman of Portland, Phyllis Wills of Hillsboro and Mary Wood of Lincoln City.