OHSU accused of dissuading workers from supporting union

By CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Events took a strange turn this summer when a union representing about 7,000 workers at Oregon Health and Science University was trying to renew its contract.

AFSCME Local 328 said in August that top administrators created fake social media accounts to “troll” the union. The administrators used pseudonyms to disseminate incorrect information about the union’s positions.

The university apologized, and one of the accused “trolls,” the vice president of human resources, Dan Forbes, resigned.

But that wasn’t the only time that the university has interfered with its workers’ efforts to make gains for themselves, union leaders say.

This year, Local 328 has complained to the state’s Employment Relations Board twice, first in August over the social media incident, and again in October, accusing the university of dissuading workers from supporting the union.

And over the past year, two other groups of workers — graduate students and residents — have formed unions in a quest to improve their working conditions. The graduate students have also complained to the state.

Matt Hilton, a call center operator at OHSU who also serves as president of AFSCME Local 328, contends the stealth social media campaign was just one incident in a series showing what he says is the university’s “anti-union bias.”

“OHSU is committed to complying with all labor relations laws in Oregon,” said Erik Robinson, a spokesman for the university, in a written response to questions from the Oregon Capital Bureau. “We cannot comment further on these particular cases while these matters are pending before the Employment Relations Board.”

The university has not responded to the labor complaints in writing, Robinson said.

Local 328 represents pretty much any worker who isn’t a doctor, nurse, graduate student or trainee: from food service workers to schedulers, shuttle drivers, people who take blood, EKG technicians, and so on.

Mediation between the parties over the social media incident fizzled, Hilton said. Local 328 is planning to file yet another complaint this week with the board. It also wants an independent investigation into the university’s labor practices.

The union alleges in one of its complaints to the state that managers told employees wearing union T-shirts, stickers and buttons to remove them in what the union asserts is violation of state labor laws.

Robinson, the university spokesman, said that the university respects employees wanting to exercise their labor rights, such as wearing union T-shirts and buttons, but they have to comply with “workplace OHSU appearance policies, such as any uniform requirements.”

The union argues that the uniform restriction on logos is applied unevenly: nobody raises an eyebrow at Nike swooshes or University of Oregon gear.

In addition, the union contends, employees have been unlawfully targeted and discriminated against for participating in union activity, citing one instance where a union steward was called into an investigatory meeting with supervisors and asked about why she needed to review her union’s contract. The same employee was told to speak to her supervisor about contract-related issues instead of the union.

> “JUST BECAUSE YOU’RE EARLY IN YOUR CAREER AND YOU’RE GAINING THAT EXPERIENCE DOESN’T MEAN THAT YOU DON’T HAVE RIGHTS.”
>
> — **David Kreisman**, spokesman for Oregon AFSCME

“OHSU’s conduct was repetitive, flagrant and egregious,” the union stated in their complaint to the Employment Relations Board.

Hilton said that new organizing among graduate researchers and residents raises questions about OHSU’s attitude toward workers.

“While this may not be a comfortable conversation with OHSU,” Hilton said, “outside of your existing represented employee issues, if your working conditions are creating other employees to want to unionize, I think that really begs the question (of), where is this level of disregard for organized workers coming from?”

In August, nearly a year after voting to form a union, the graduate researchers also complained to the state’s Employment Relations Board, accusing OHSU managers of refusing to bargain in good faith with the workers and of unlawfully interfering with workers’ attempts to organize. The complaint, which was amended in late October, is pending.

The trouble began almost as soon as they voted to form a union, according to the students.

The university objected, saying that they were students and not employees, said Sam Papadakis, a fifth-year doctoral student in neuroscience who is involved in the union drive.

The distinction seems technical, but not being officially an employee has significant drawbacks, Papadakis said.

Currently, the university’s approximately 300 graduate students are paid like independent contractors, which means it’s harder to prove their income when seeking to rent an apartment, for instance, or to set up an independent retirement account, Papadakis says.

But OHSU withdrew its objections to the petition, according to state records. The Employment Relations Board certified the graduate researchers’ bargaining unit Jan. 2.

The graduate researchers are pushing for a higher stipend — the maximum is $32,000 per year for students in the school of medicine, and is lower for doctoral students in nursing. They say that’s too low for Portland, where OHSU is located.

And they also want the contract to ensure that managers can’t ask students to work more than 40 hours a week.

Papadakis said that the graduate researchers realize that attaining high-level science degrees can be challenging for people who can’t afford low earnings during graduate school, or perhaps due to a disability cannot work more than 40 hours a week.

“We’ve unionized for a lot of different reasons,” said Papadakis, “Which all seem to center around this one core theme, which is that we want OHSU and the graduate programs to be a place where anyone can come here and pursue a Ph.D. and join the ranks of science.”

But the graduate researchers say the negotiations have been “contentious and drawn out,” according to their complaint to the state.

They allege that university officials canceled about half the bargaining sessions, changed meeting locations at the last minute, and that they don’t respond “in a timely manner” to the graduate researchers’ proposals. And they say the university has disseminated inaccurate information about the union.

The graduate researchers also contend they were dissuaded from attending an October rally in support of a union, stating that an official at the School of Medicine told students that attending an October rally for unionization would face an unexcused absence from their labs or classes.

Not long after the graduate researchers held their rally Oct. 9, a third group of workers announced their intent to unionize: medical residents.

On Oct. 15, a majority of the university’s roughly 800 house officers — physicians who have a medical degree but are still in supervised training — voted to form a union through AFSCME. House officers can be residents, interns or fellows.

Oregon AFSCME says that the university is one of few public institutions on the West Coast where such workers haven’t formed a union.

“As physicians on the front line, we need a real voice to make decisions that affect our patients, our ongoing medical education, and our lives,” said Heather Buxton, a psychiatry resident, in a statement. “We believe a union can facilitate this.”

After the house officers announced they were forming a union, the university said in a news release that it “recognizes and respects our employees’ right to unionize,” and that it has “had a long and productive relationship with organized labor.”

“We have had several opportunities to collaborate with our House Officers Association on key issues and look forward to continuing that dialogue in collaboration with organized labor, with approval from the Employee Relations Board,” Renee Edwards, Chief Medical Officer of OHSU Healthcare, said in a statement.

Charters: Voters approved changing election process

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The change to use “sheriff’s office,” she said, “has no substantive effect whatsoever.”

Grable stressed the committee’s most important measure never got before the voters.

That was the recommendation to adopt language in the charter requiring the county commissioners to hire a county manager. That was the “meat and bones” of the committee’s work, she said, which garnered the support of Commissioner George Murdock. Fellow commissioners Bill Elfering and John Shafer, however, did not vote to place that proposal on the ballot.

Milton-Freewater voters had a meaty decision to fund an ambulance service and passed two measures to that end.

The measure to dissolve the Milton-Freewater Ambulance Service Area Health District was passing 63.3% to 36.7%. That action also ended the district’s tax rate of 25 cents per $1,000 of assessed value.

The measure to form the new Milton-Freewater Valley Ambulance District was passing 62.2% to 37.8%. That comes with a tax rate of $1.10 per $1,000 beginning in fiscal year 2020-21.

George White, the district’s treasurer, warned residents the money to pay for the ambulance service was running out. That 25-cent tax rate meant the district collected about $165,000 a year, which it paid to the Milton-Freewater Emergency Medical Services for ambulance services. The five-year contract ends June 30, 2022. District chair Dan Kilmer has stated there is no way the private company is going to re-up for another five years at such a meager amount.

The $1.10 rate will generate about $736,000 a year, enough to pay for the service and save up for a new ambulance.

White was thrilled with the outcome of the election.

“We are so excited for our community,” he said, and the passage of the dual measures shows the confidence the community has in the company providing the service and its staff.

The district board held multiple public meetings to explain the ambulance service was in jeopardy without the passage of the proposals and originally considered a rate of $1.40 per $1,000 in assessed value. City leaders balked at that amount, so the ambulance board sought the lower amount.

White said he is hopeful the board does not have to go through this again for a long time. He also said a growth rate of 3% a year would cover the rest of what the district needs.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Sharon Remillard counts ballots after removing them from their envelopes in the office of the Umatilla County Elections Division on Tuesday afternoon.

Bond: Hermiston school bond passes

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The 25-year bond will fund the replacement of the district’s oldest elementary school built 57 years ago, Rocky Heights, with a 600-student capacity building and construct a new 600-student building on Theater Lane.

It will also fund an annex to increase capacity at the high school, and elementary school site improvements. The projects, according to the district, will allow the district to adjust school boundaries for Highland Hills Elementary School to reduce enrollment there to a more “appropriate” level.

Bond Measure 30-130 was announced in July, shortly after the district paid off all pre-2008 bond debt, decreasing property taxes by 40 cents per $1,000. This new bond is projected to preserve that decrease, keeping the tax level at $3.65 per $1,000 of assessed value.

The payoff dates for a $69.9 million bond approved by voters in 2008, which funded the replacement of two elementary schools and Armand Larive Middle School, are in June 2026 and June 2029.

In 2017, the school district failed to pass a measure for a 22-year $104 million bond, which also aimed to replace Rocky Heights and construct a new elementary school, as well as replace Highland Hills. The bond would have cost 90 cents per $1,000 assessed value.

“Community feedback was that it wasn’t time for Highland Hills yet,” Mooney said.

The *East Oregonian* reported that 59% of voters voted no on that bond. Some voters said they didn’t want a tax increase on a fixed income and others were not feeling ready to finance a new elementary school. Some said they felt that people who were newer to the area wouldn’t pull their weight in terms of property taxes.

“Reflecting on the 2017 bond,” Mooney said Tuesday night after the unofficial results were collected, “there’s been a large swing in voters, and we’ve been working hard to win the support of the community.”

Katie Saul, director of business services, said that the $104 million ask back then was too much for the community.

“Not to say that there were unneeded items in that bond, but we really prioritized for this one,” she said. “We know we have our work cut out, and we’re determined to do this.”

Funding: Benefits for Eastern Oregonians will include increased wildfire spending

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The Interior funding also includes $500 million for the Payment in Lieu of Taxes program that funds services for rural communities, including public safety, social services, transportation and housing. Around 11% of lands in Morrow County and 9% in Umatilla County are publicly owned and federally managed.

The Port of Morrow will see some of the $7 million included in the Transportation, Housing and Urban Development Appropriations bill for the Marine Highways Program that supports the nation’s waterway transportation system. According to the Port of Morrow’s website, port-related businesses employ 8,452 people and provides an economic output of $2.77 billion. More than $500 million of that total is labor income, $118 million goes to local and state tax revenue payments and $142 million is paid out for federal taxes.

“The barge expansion would create family wage jobs in the region, reduce transportation costs, and alleviate highway and rail congestion,” said Ryan Neal, executive director of the Port of Morrow.

A healthier basin benefits humans as well as struggling salmon populations. The Commerce, Justice and Science Appropriations bill provides $56 million to support the Mitchell Act, a program that funds fish hatcheries, and the Pacific Salmon Treaty that provides the framework for the U.S. and Canada to jointly conserve and manage Pacific salmon. Further funding for the Northwest’s symbolic fish species, the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund received $65 million, a competitive grant program designed to address declining Pacific salmon and steelhead populations by supporting conservation efforts in California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Alaska.

Oregon’s tribes benefit from the Commerce, Justice and Science Appropriations bill with funding for the Tribal Grants and Victim Assistance funding. To address Oregon’s native and tribal communities that have been disenfranchised in law enforcement, health outcomes and victims’ rights, the committee approved a total of $77 million in grants, including $38 million for tribal assistance, $27 million for tribal resources and $4 million for the Office of Violence Against Women for a special domestic violence criminal jurisdiction program.

The agriculture bill includes a $35 million increase for the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations that supports irrigation districts in need of improving water efficiency and conservation or otherwise improve fish and wildlife habitat and conserve water while keeping Oregon’s family farms in business.

When counterpart bills are available from the U.S. House of Representatives, the two versions will be merged and put up for vote by both houses of Congress and signed into law.