EDITORIALS & OPINIONS

The Bulletin
AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

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It's time to end the hospital strike

Both sides are talking; that's a good thing

It's time to end the walkout at St. Charles Bend. The union strike by some 150 medical technicians enters its ninth day Friday (if an agreement is not struck late Thursday) after collective bargaining broke down prior to the March 4 strike.

Both sides were speaking with a mediator as of press time Thursday.

The Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals organized about a year ago. Since that time, it has sought a contract with St. Charles and after some 28 meetings, there's been no settlement. The last bargaining sessions were in early December.

There is not much information coming out of the mediation, so it's hard to judge how far apart both sides are today. According to St. Charles and The Bulletin reporting, two core issues remain on the table: Compensation and union security.

The teams have agreed upon wages for the first year of the contract. Under this agreement, the average hourly wage for techs in the bargaining unit will be $41.94 per hour. However, wages for years two through five of the contract are still being negotiated, according to St. Charles.

The union has also requested a closed shop, meaning all St. Charles technical employees' jobs would be conditional upon joining the union and paying 1.4% of their base wage in dues or paying agency fees and giving up voting rights. St. Charles has asked for an open shop in order to give its caregivers a choice on whether they are members of the union.

Medical staff inside the hospital have raised safety concerns over the administration hiring replacement workers who are just getting oriented to the work as the strike progresses. While the replacement workers may be well vetted, it's not ideal for the best health care versus a med-tech who is from the community and understands the nuances of how this hospital functions.

St. Charles, for its part, took a big financial hit when it halted nonemergency surgeries this time last year as COVID-19 struck. It has been successful in reducing the number of COVID patients hospitalized, and it is the driving force in getting vaccines into the arms of county residents. That is a big effort on its part.

Both sides have much to gain and much to lose, and personal accusations and acrimony are starting to boil up, acerbating the issue. It's time to bridge the gap in the talks and bring the walkout to an end.

Proposed tax increase would kill Central Oregon jobs

GUEST COLUMN

As local business owners and residents, brewers care deeply about our communities. That's why we invest and create so many jobs here in Central Oregon.

Prior to COVID-19, Oregon was home to 400 breweries creating 43,000 jobs, $2 billion in wages and $6.7 billion in economic activity for the state. Sadly, it's estimated due to the pandemic, 10,000 of those beer-related jobs have been lost.

The last thing members of the Central Oregon Brewer's Guild need are the unprecedented tax increase being considered by Salem politicians, which would kill our businesses and the jobs we create in the community.

House Bill 3296 would increase taxes on beer and cider by nearly 3,000% and increase taxes on wine by 1,700%, making Oregon the highest beer, wine, cider and spirits tax state in the nation. It would increase the beer and cider tax from $2.60 a barrel to $72.60 per barrel. And wine taxes would increase from 65 cents to $10.65 per gallon. These aren't minor adjustments a business can simply absorb or pass along to the consumer.

While we make beer because we love it, we still need to make a living. A tax increase of this size would more than eat up profit margins, leaving many breweries no other choices but to fold, no longer sell beer in the state of Oregon or set prices at unsustainable, uncompetitive levels.

Oregon's beer, wine, cider and spirits sectors are already the third largest source of revenue for the state — only behind income taxes and the state lottery. Yet for some reason, less than 1% of Oregon's budget goes to alcohol treatment and only 3.5% of existing beer, wine, cider and spirits revenue is dedicated to addiction recovery.

Without question, more needs to be done to address addiction, which is why last fall a majority of voters supported Measure 110, increasing addiction services funding by more than $57 million. The resources are already there; we just need to use them better.

Before raising taxes on Oregon's breweries, politicians need to deeply examine the current system and why existing dollars are not being spent on these programs. Brewers stand ready and willing to work with lawmakers and stakeholders on these issues.

In order to survive what has already been an extremely difficult past 12 months, Oregon's breweries, wineries, cideries, distilleries, restaurants and bars need the support of our customers and elected officials.

Voters know, our businesses are job creators for our state and must be protected, which is why 74% or Oregonians oppose increasing our taxes.

People come to Bend for the outdoor recreation and beer. If Oregon breweries are taxed to death, our community just won't be the same. Tell lawmakers to oppose HB 3296. Don't Tax My Drink!

— Robin Johnson is president of the Central Oregon Brewer's Guild

My Nickel's Worth

Votes reveal GOP remains Trump's party

I hope that all voters remember when they get their American Rescue check that not a single Republican voted to help you!

Polls showed that Americans were in favor of this bill. The Republicans continue to be afraid of former President Donald Trump even after he lost the election, second time that he lost the popular vote, and is hiding out in Florida.

Trump has appeared only once, giving a speech in Florida in which he put down some Republicans that are in his party. He doesn't care about anyone but himself. He doesn't even care that some of his voters are financially struggling because he ended his speech asking for his followers to send money directly to Donald J. Trump, not to the Republican party but to him personally because he's going to need a legal defense fund.

Hopefully, they are not that gullible because he made $1.9 billion while he was in office (according to Forbes magazine), much of it taxpayer money at his resorts, so let him use his own money to fight his legal battle.

Asking for donations to his personal account only shows that he isn't in support of the Republican Party now but once again he's only for himself, the party of Trump.

If the Republicans ever want to restore their party to what it was "Before Trump Decided to be a Republican" — a working, two-party system — they have to stand up to him and expunge him from the party.

President Joe Biden is busy keeping his eyes on the road to make America better and on the path of helping the American people, all people regardless of party. Biden is on his way to restoring our country to greatness with an approval rating of 62%, something Trump never accomplished. Glad we now have a real president, a qualified president with years of public service experience and a president with empathy!

— Sue Ooten, Madras

Vaccinations a godsend

I'm a mother of two young children and work in higher education; I am also a fitness instructor on the side. Both of my professions have been two of the industries most affected during this pandemic and like many, are desperate for our businesses to fully open so that our economy can recover. But with two children, I need everything to be as safe as possible.

Deschutes County has just recently dropped out of the extreme risk category, and officials are now reopening indoor dining and our gyms. Still, we will have a long way to go. People continue to be out of work and our children's' education remains interrupted. We are all eager for the vaccine to be widely available.

Thankfully, our state has administered just under one million doses of the vaccine, and we are finally on our way to immunity from the virus. Health care distributors are ensuring that all corners of the nation are receiving vaccines as soon as they become available — as well as all the protective and administration equipment our health professionals need. With each vaccination, we are one step closer to safety from the virus and a fully reopened economy.

Our economy is hanging on by a thread, and it simply cannot survive many more months of the pandemic.

Our children, too, are suffering, being stripped of socialization, human connection, and in some cases, education.

It is imperative to vaccinate those who are able so that we can end the pandemic and begin to rebuild our community and economy.

— Emily Fitch, Redmond

Democrats expanding their voter base

In reply to a letter I sent Sen. Jeff Merkley about the thousands of illegal immigrants now crossing our border, he replied that "allowing people to migrate is in our DNA." His overall reply was generic in nature and addressed none of the questions I asked about the illegal immigrant's impact on our environment, global warming or spreading the virus.

His dated thinking was appropriate in 1886 when the Statue of Liberty was built and world population was about 1.5 billion.

Since then world population has doubled twice, from 1.5 billion to 3 billion in 1960 and 3 billion to 6 billion in the year 2000. It is projected to double again in 2075.

In short, Congress, including our two senators, has allowed millions to enter the U.S. illegally with Central American and Mexico's high birth rates supplying endless numbers of migrants. We may feel compassion for these people, but to allow the population of the U.S. to continually climb will ensure a continued deterioration of our environment and is a recipe for the development of a permanent underclass of unskilled workers living in poverty.

The Democratic leadership is considering proposing "Comprehensive Immigration Reform," which basically allows thousands of immigrants into the U.S. legally, rather than being illegal. This will greatly expand their voter base.

— William Boyd, Bend

Letters policy

We welcome your letters. Letters should be limited to one issue, contain no more than 250 words and include the writer's signature, phone number and address for verification. We edit letters for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We reject poetry, personal attacks, form letters, letters submitted elsewhere and those appropriate for other sections of The Bulletin. Writers are limited to one letter or guest column every 30 days.

Guest columns

Your submissions should be between 550 and 650 words; they must be signed; and they must include the writer's phone number and address for verification. We edit submissions for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We reject those submitted elsewhere. Locally submitted columns alternate with national columnists and commentaries. Writers are limited to one letter or guest column every 30 days.

How to submit

Please address your submission to either My Nickel's Worth or Guest Column and mail, fax or email it to The Bulletin. Email submissions are preferred.

Email: letters@bendbulletin.com

Write: My Nickel's Worth/Guest Column
P.O. Box 6020
Bend, OR 97708

Fax: 541-385-5804

The question is, who pays for employee benefits?

BY BILL RICH

GUEST COLUMN

It's the beginning of a month, which means it's time for Rich Belzer's guest column. While other local monthly columnists appear to be well qualified in the subject matter that they present (based on italicized credentials at the end of their articles), Belzer, on the other hand, "lives in Bend" and fails to cite any authoritative sources in his column.

In his most recent March 6 column, Belzer tells us how America needs to catch up with the rest of the world (primarily Europe, "EU") in the areas of free health care, free college and free preschool/child care. Before jumping on the Belzer bandwagon, please understand he totally ignores (as usual) the critically important other half of the story. In this case, it is who really pays for this.

In the EU, corporations pay for many of these "free" programs, but they get much of the money from their employees. How? If you are a skilled technician or professional and your identical job was located in Europe, you would be paid about 20% to 30% less than you would earn in the U.S. International salary surveys support this.

To compete globally, EU corporations use these savings from their employees to pay its portion of these social benefit obligations (health care, long-term care, social security, unemployment, education, etc.). The cost of these programs average approximately 20% to 30% of payroll costs (according to a study by PriceWaterhouse).

In addition, corporate income tax levels are higher in the EU compared to the U.S. by an average of 5% to 6% according to the Tax Foundation.

Employees also contribute directly to these social benefit programs via payroll deductions. According to PriceWaterhouse, employees contribute about 15% to 20% of their earnings these programs. This compares to 7.65% for FICA paid by U.S. employees but this excludes the cost of health insurance which in 2020 averaged about $7,000 annually for an employee with a family (according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics).

However, U.S. health care benefits are often paid by the employer at little or no cost to the employee. About 49% of the U.S. population is covered by employer group insurance according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

If this isn't enough, the EU also has a Value Added Tax ("VAT"), which is basically a national sales tax. It is added to the cost of just about everything purchased. It averages approximately 21% across Europe according to the Tax Foundation.

While corporations initially pay this tax on their purchases, they receive a credit for this tax when they sell their product and add the VAT tax to its price. Thus, EU corporations don't pay this tax, rather it's paid by the final consumer … you. It is highly regressive.

Everyone pays the same rate regardless of income level and thus lower-income families pay a much higher proportion of their earnings for VAT. Imagine paying 21% more for everything you buy. This taxes helps finance these governments and pay for these "free programs."

It doesn't take rocket science to realize that a U.S. family is much better off than its European counterpart, especially if the family does not have either young children or college age children.

The big difference is that in America, you get to keep much more of your hard-earned money and make your own decisions where it should be spent. Does America need to do a better job in providing affordable, accessible health care, day care, and educational opportunities? Definitely. But Belzer's model is not the one to emulate and based on his extensive international travels, he should know that. After all, people still come to America to get the best health care and education the world has to offer. We must be doing something right.

— Bill Rich is a CPA and recently retired CFO of an international food and beverage manufacturer. He lives in Bend.