

From Labor History

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Nine Days That Shook Oregon Or: How OPEU Became a Union

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[For the new section of our web site entitled "From Labor History," we reprint the following article from the May 1988 issue of our predecessor publication, Bulletin in Defense of Marxism — The Editors, Labor Standard]

It is popular these days for members of Oregon Public Employees Union (OPEU—Service Employees International Union Local 503) to say that we became a union at 12:01 a.m., September 16, 1987. That was the first minute we went on strike. While "union" has been in our name since 1973, OPEU had been, admittedly, a very ineffective organization. We threatened to strike twice before, in 1975 and 1983, but backed down both times. As one staff member put it, "Basically the bargaining team discussed how long we would wait until we caved." The state always said "take it or leave it" and we always took it. But 1987 was different because we were ready.

Two years ago the union initiated an internal organizing campaign which focused on negotiating a successful contract in 1987. Its major goal was to empower the membership. From October 1985 through March 1987 we added 2,000 new members through organizing and aggressively representing those already in the bargaining unit. This increased the union from 58 to 70 percent of the work force. The second phase of our plan was to escalate militant actions in support of the union's contract demands. We wanted to pressure the state, but even more important we hoped to mobilize the membership in preparation for a strike. The campaign took on two primary aspects: organizing around pay equity for job classifications which were lower paid because the majority of workers employed in them were women, and job site actions.

Pay Equity Organizing

OPEU is the only union in Oregon that has set pay equity as a priority issue. It is something we have been paying attention to for six years. The union hired an economist and research director who in 1983 headed the Comparable Worth Task Force which was established by Oregon State Senate Bill 484—with the aim of revamping the antiquated state classification system to "attempt to achieve equity."

As a union we invested a lot of time and resources in trying to shape the state's new classification system, believing that this would be the vehicle through which we could achieve the goal of pay equity for women. As years



This aerial photo shows a section of a giant march through Salem, Oregon, by SEIU Local 503 strikers and supporters in 1995. SEIU

went by, however, it became clear that we were being co-opted by management, and that we would have to reevaluate our involvement in their process. In 1985, when Governor Atiyeh vetoed the first pay equity bill, we decided that we should leave the classification system to the state. We informed the administration that OPEU would demand pay equity upgrades on the basis of the old classification system if their new system was not ready by the time our next negotiations began. There was no reason for us to delay pay equity bargaining just because they couldn't get their new system together.

503's "Rolling Strike" of 1987, which is described in the accompanying article, was subsequently declared illegal by the State Legislature. In 1995, Local 503's strike was more traditional, but we made an extra strong statement by marching through downtown, passing by the State Capitol Building to the State Fairgrounds, which was the only place big enough for us to hold our rally.

Now we began to organize in earnest. We had to start by showing OPEU's commitment to seeing pay equity become a reality after all these years. We had spent a lot of energy on the classification system, which kept falling through, and we had worked to get pay equity legislation passed and money appropriated just to see the governor veto it. The workers in the pay equity classifications had to see that we were determined to force the implementation of this demand, and that it was possible to do so despite the failures of past efforts.

Our first rank-and-file activity was to organize a series of pay equity hearings. We chose the higher education agencies because they have the largest number of clerical and food-service workers—classifications which are the lowest paid and most undervalued by the state. The hearings started at Oregon State University, where they were so successful that we held others, at the University of Oregon and at Portland State University.

The hearings consisted of testimony by workers, most of whom had never spoken in public before, about the value of the work that they did and about their own poverty. We broke the taboo which says that workers are not supposed to talk about how much money we make. That part alone had a very liberating effect on the proceedings. The hearings were profoundly emotional both for those giving the testimony and for the audience—which was composed mostly of state workers and some faculty and community members. State legislators from the appropriate districts were invited to attend, but it was made clear that they were there to listen. This was a night for the workers to talk.

One example of the kind of testimony which came out at the hearings was from a clerical assistant who had written out what she wanted to say, but decided that she could not stand up and read it. We had someone else read it for her. The starting salary for her job classification was \$862 per month. As a single mother receiving such a pitiful wage she qualified for food stamps, housing subsidy, and the school lunch program. On top of that, she was depending on a community food basket to be able to have Thanksgiving dinner for her family.

All of this while she was working full time for the state of Oregon.

The initial purpose of the hearings was to educate our union and the public about the need for pay equity, and to get media coverage to show that OPEU was gearing up for the next stage of the fight. We succeeded in these goals. The president of Oregon State University, who attended the initial hearing, began to slump in his chair after the first couple of witnesses testified. As he was leaving, the local paper asked for his comments. All he could say was, "It's a travesty," words which appeared on the paper's front page the next morning.

But as important as such publicity was, the most significant result of these events was the transformation of the women who testified. They became a core of pay equity activists, who eventually played important roles in the leadership of our strike.

Involving the Broader Women's Movement

In the summer of 1986 we started organizing a Pay Equity Action Coalition. We wanted to involve women's organizations and other unions in this coalition to pressure the state. Our main activity was a Pay Equity Day rally in Salem, in front of the state capitol.

The coalition got off to a slow start because of the elections coming up in November. The Oregon Women's Political Caucus was supporting Republican Norma Paulus for governor, which put it in conflict with the AFL-CIO unions' official position favoring Democrat Neil Goldschmidt. Once the elections were over, however, there was a lot of excitement about the rally, which by this time was about two months away.

The National Organization for Women did not involve itself actively as an organization, but many of its activists helped to build the event. The Oregon Women's Political Caucus declined to be part of the coalition, but since it merely represents elected officials and is not a membership organization it wasn't missed much. The Women's Rights Coalition, a lobbying group, participated in the coalition and decided to organize a lobbying day the day before the rally. But the most important job remained in the hands of the OPEU—turning out the numbers.

It was not difficult to motivate the union as a whole to take on the rally as a major priority. We were gearing up for bargaining and it was generally accepted that 1987 was the year that, as a union, we had to go to bat for low-wage workers. We enlisted support from the trades and other male-dominated classifications to help with the physical aspects of the rally, including security. Meanwhile we worked to fill the buses and get women to Salem.

It was pouring rain, but 800 people showed up, with busloads coming from the eastern and southern parts of the state. Everyone agreed that it was a great victory and the largest demonstration that OPEU had ever organized. A counterdemonstration called by three groups—the Eagle Forum, Dad's

Against Discrimination, and the Oregon Fair Labor Standards Committee—drew 35 people, who carried signs reading "Kill Pay Equity" and "Dyke Worth."

As a result of this rally and the pay equity hearings the issue was becoming known in communities and workplaces across the state. And everyone knew that the leadership for the movement for pay equity was the OPEU. Members developed a new pride in "our" union, which at times was referred to as the Oregon Pay Equity Union. As we approached the time for contract bargaining we had to disregard old attitudes about what bargaining should be and replace them with new ones. That was part of our job on the Pay Equity Bargaining Team. We started repeating the maxim that would predominate as we went into the formal sessions: contracts are not negotiated at the bargaining table, but by activity at the worksite.

We had to make sure that the workers in the pay equity classifications remained active throughout the period of contract negotiations. At one point, when discussions at the bargaining table were becoming very impersonal, we decided to make it all a little more tangible for the management team by having people at their worksites xerox their pay stubs and write personal notes on them. We then presented these notes at one bargaining session. At another time, after management tried to stall the negotiations by calling a number of long caucus meetings, we called one of our own and adjourned to the front of the Executive Department where there was a candlelight rally and songfest in progress.

Other pressure was applied. With management clearly trying to hold pay equity "hostage," workers chose a symbolic protest—sealing the doors of the Executive Department one morning with yellow tape, and tying yellow ribbons around nearby trees. Late one night a few workers went to the home of Karen Roach, head of Personnel and Labor Relations, tied yellow ribbons on her trees, taped the entrance to her driveway, and placed some Burma shave-type signs which she would have to read on her way to work the next morning.

We had come a long way from the time when members of the OPEU thought that once a governor vetoed a pay equity bill that was where things ended. Organizing around this issue had become an important component of the union's increasing militancy. There could be no question that for these workers, pay equity was an issue over which they were willing to go on strike.

Job Site Actions

Job site activity started in June and grew in intensity as the contract expired. These spontaneous demonstrations and actions in the workplace escalated the involvement of workers in the bargaining process, and once again reiterated the theme that the real bargaining was taking place where we *worked* every day. Workers picketed in front of their office buildings, sent delegations unannounced to supervisors' offices, and demonstrated around specific worksite issues. As it became clearer that a strike was unavoidable, the activities became more militant.

One action was a lunch hour "death of dignity" demonstration where hundreds of state workers, dressed in black, followed a casket being carried into the State Executive Department building. It remained there after 1:00 p.m. draped with flowers and black armbands for all the managers to see as they returned from lunch.

In some state offices where workers routinely worked through their morning and afternoon breaks, a new tradition was established—"unity breaks" where everyone walked out together in a festive atmosphere, with music and plenty of OPEU balloons. A branch manager of Adult and Family Services tried to ban the balloons, saying they were "conducting union business in the workplace." The next day more balloons showed up, printed with "OPEU conducting union business." The more management reacted, the more outraged and outrageous the workers became.

Some of the most effective actions took place around the workload issues of Children's Services Division and Adult and Family Services. Offices conducted "work-ins." Union members refused to leave their offices at 5:00 and continued to work late into the night. If managers were at home watching the 11:00 news they saw their workers on T.V. telling their individual stories of problems connected to work overload.

The militancy of the activities varied from agency to agency. Whether the worksite was simply organized to have everyone wear stickers that said "Equity and Justice in '87," or participated in the work-ins, the result was the same. There emerged a new visibility and empowerment of the rank and file, who now understood that they were the most important part of the bargaining process.

The union began to publish a weekly *Negotiation News* to keep the entire membership informed about what was happening. When that organ turned into a daily *Strike Alert* we knew that we were ready.

Issues and Strategy in the Strike

OPEU represents 16,500 state employees in 45 state agencies, who work in 550 different job classifications. The workers we represent run six state colleges and universities, the departments of justice and revenue, the department of human services, Oregon Public Broadcasting, the departments of agriculture, forestry, state

parks, Oregon Department of Transportation, and the Bureau of Labor and Industries—to name a few. The major issues emerged as: pay, insurance, pay equity, seniority rights, and work overload. For some agencies work overload and seniority were seen as more important than the pay issues, while in other classifications pay, insurance, and pay equity were higher priorities. The proposed takebacks in insurance combined with a 2 percent pay raise offered by the state would have meant a net gain for some clerical workers of a mere 21 cents per month. When the strike vote was taken in August, it was 95 percent in favor of a walkout.

When the strike was over it was easy to look back and say that our approach, which we referred to as the "strategic strike," was a stroke of collective genius. But explaining and executing this approach during the course of events was a little more difficult. Many workers favored a more comprehensive action, a general strike carried out simultaneously against all state agencies. This appeared to be easier to prepare for and to administer. But it would also have been just as easy for management to plan for and respond to, and the state administration was clearly preparing for such an event.

We tried to do something different, and called our approach "striking smarter." It was explained well by the elected leadership through the *OPEU Activist*, which went out to union members across the state after the strike vote:

OPEU's strike plan will involve every member of the bargaining unit. But that involvement will come at different times and for limited periods of time. To strike strategically and smarter, we must identify the areas of management's greatest vulnerability. Then, like skilled surgeons, we must dissect the target. Secondly, we must never underestimate the opponent. The state is strong, but we can undercut its strength by acting unpredictably. We must 'outthink' management by disrupting where they least expect disruption. A strategic strike has no end point. After day one, every manager in the state Executive Department must say and think that this activity can go on forever. Unlike a general strike, with total disruption but uncertain duration, a smart strike will force settlement because it causes serious disruption and the end is out of sight. The key is duration. We can adopt the strategy of European armies standing as clear targets in red coats, on the battlefield, willing to sacrifice thousands of lives for victory. Or we can be revolutionary Minutemen, willing to respond to the clarion call of our own Paul Reveres on a minute's notice to strike without warning, disappearing into the mist before the injunction is filed, leaving confused and dazed supervisors attempting to assess the damage and jumpy at the prospect of the next work stoppage.

No doubt this exact approach will not work for every union or in all situations. But for us, given our specific opponent and tasks, it worked exceptionally well. Many of the specific things that we did, as well as our basic approach—the creative application of the strike tactic based on a mobilized and informed rank and file—can certainly be applied profitably by other workers in struggle. It must be remembered at all times that the key to our success was not *primarily* the specific way we chose to conduct the strike, but the worksite activity before the event, which helped the union's rank and file to gain a sense of their own power. It is this which gave us the strength to carry out an effective strike strategy, the strength to continue on until we won.

If there was any problem with our strategy, it was getting workers to return to work after three days on strike, which was the average "roll." Part of the power of this kind of strike is in its discipline. The union is in control because the state did not know who would go out or when.

In fact, only a very few people knew until the night before. This meant that hundreds of workers had to be called to be told that they should show up for picketing the next morning. This was a huge organizational task, but it did not cause any significant problems because every night workers were waiting by their phones to hear if they would be on strike the next day. And it was necessary to maintain tight security in order to keep management off guard, as well as to show that we could take workers off the job and bring them back at will.

Some of the greatest chaos was created by the state itself. We did not schedule Adult and Family Services and the Children's Services Division to strike until the third "roll." Because those workers were some of the most militant, the state decided to close many offices and consolidate services on the first day of the strike, expecting the vast majority of the workers to be out. For example, the offices in Corvallis, Lebanon, and Sweet Home were closed, and managers and non-striking workers were supposed to report to the Albany office. Of course, everyone showed up for work in Albany, and there was mass confusion.

For those workers who did not feel right about working while others were on strike, or who didn't want to go back once they were out, we had an answer. Join the "Flying Squadron."

The Flying Squadron

As effective as our overall strategy was, it was the element of the Flying Squadron that brought heart and soul to the strike. The Flying Squadron was made up of workers, predominantly women workers, who were committed to the strike from the first day. We traveled the state, building the strike and keeping morale high. Out of the Flying Squadron came women and men who are now our best activists and the new leaders of OPEU.

As members of the Flying Squadron met their sisters and brothers in other agencies and traveled the state, their view of their union changed. One bargaining team member described it this way. "The experience took people out of themselves and gave them a view of the world outside their own agencies. They saw a union movement and it expanded their view of the world." The issues for one agency became the issues for all agencies.

There was no question but that the high point for the Flying Squadron was when we emptied the huge state office building in downtown Portland. We needed an action on Friday to build momentum going into the

weekend, so about thirty Flying Squadron members with whistles around their necks entered the elevator in the building. We got off at each floor in groups, blew our whistles, and announced that the building was now on strike. It was 10:00 in the morning. As hundreds of workers walked and ran out of the building to join the picketers on the outside we knew the strike was strong and ready to go into the second roll.

It should also be mentioned that PERU, the union that represents OPEU staff members, voted to donate all their pay to our strike fund as long as the strike lasted, and most of them became members of the Flying Squadron.

Whether the Flying Squadron was emptying office buildings or bolstering morale on the picket lines around the state, it added a unique dimension to the strike.

The Democratic Governor

One of the strongest lessons learned by many OPEU members, who had worked to elect Governor Neil Goldschmidt, was one of betrayal. It was a very painful, but for that same reason a very powerful lesson. The sentiment of these workers was reflected in a poster produced by the Flying Squadron. It showed a pair of old sneakers with the words, "Neil: We Walked for You; You Walked on Us; We're Walking Out!"

The governor showed up at the two main AFL-CIO Labor Day picnics nine days before the strike deadline and was greeted by hundreds of angry OPEU members. In front of the labor gathering he joked about OPEU "scrapping for its workers." He said he was sure that there would be a settlement before the strike deadline. At the same time he was already planning to threaten state workers by declaring our strike illegal. On a technicality, a day before the strike, he claimed our strike would not be legal because, even though we had given the required ten-day strike notice, we hadn't given the required notice to end the contract extension. The governor's plan backfired, however. The more management threatened, the madder people got. Instead of being intimidated they got angry. We put out a leaflet in the workplace which said, "State Fails in Last Minute Maneuver... Consider the Source. Join the Strike for Justice and Equity." And the workers did.

In the middle of the strike, the AFL-CIO state convention took place. We had been working to get the convention to rescind its invitation to Goldschmidt to be the featured speaker, but the bureaucrats wouldn't budge. Meanwhile, we had buses chartered to take 300 Flying Squadron members to Seaside, Oregon, to shut down the convention when Goldschmidt started to speak. There were a lot of disappointed Flying Squadron members when Goldschmidt decided not to attend and allowed the AFL-CIO leadership to save face. The governor explained to the press that he canceled his speech because he didn't want to cause problems for his "friends in the AFL-CIO."

Goldschmidt's next move was to threaten to lock out workers, saying that the union violated the law by holding a rolling strike after issuing a notice of a general strike. Or as he put it, "the question is, can they roll through an agency, have us replace the staff, then bring the people back, displace our substitutes, and then go out again?" Indeed, that was exactly what we wanted them to worry about.

The Settlement

When the settlement came there was a great sense of victory. For the first time state workers had fought back. We had conducted a spirited strike and we broke the governor's budget for the first time in history. We won an additional \$9.1 million — an average of one million dollars for every day we were on strike. In addition, we saved fully paid health insurance, preserved contract language which guarantees layoff by seniority, won a 10 percent pay equity increase for 4,800 workers and 5 percent for an additional 800. Plus there was a \$70 cash, tax-free strike bonus for everyone in the bargain-ing unit. Still, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that the most important thing we won was pride in the fact that we are now a union.

A month after the strike OPEU held its annual General Council. One evening there was a special program to honor the Flying Squadron. During that evening, and during the next day, workers spontaneously started chanting, "UNION! UNION!" That says it all.