



LOCAL Voice



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Good Answers to Hard Questions

"Cub" reporter for the Local Voice, Martine Roberts-Pillon went in search of a story. What she found were some good answers to some hard questions. Marti has a curious mind, an incredible wit, and a penchant for not taking "no" for an answer. She called on DEQ Local 3336 Union President, Doug Drake and Leslie Kochan, 2nd Vice President.

Marti: If I'm interested in joining the Union, I guess the first question I have is what has the Union done for me? (See "What Has the Union Done For Me?" Page 5)

Doug: The first thing that comes to mind is that the Union's responsibility is to look out for all employees. One way is through our contract, which is a contract between management and non-management employees. The other piece I think is important is that the Union provides us a political voice that we are not allowed to sound as public employees. In light of the current political climate, that is, Sizemore's antics and a conservative legislature, I believe DEQ employees need this voice more than ever.

Marti: When you say "look out for employees", I think the thing that comes to some people's minds is that the Union looks out for disgruntled workers whom management has legitimate concerns about.

Doug: When an employee files a grievance, the Union insures that the employee has representation. The Union does not file grievances for frivolous complaints. The Union's effort is to resolve conflicts. Good conflict resolution occurs when power is balanced. What happens in most cases -- through the intervention of a Union

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Steward who is a fellow worker voluntarily representing the employee to management — is that the problem is resolved without ever getting to a grievance. That's a benefit to managers and employees. And let me remind you we represent union members and Fair Share employees. But what we spend most of our time on is negotiating our contract for things like increased wages, flextime, comp-time, and maintaining out health benefits.

Marti: So are you saying that without the Union, DEQ wouldn't have flextime and our wages would be lower?

Leslie: I'd like to talk about that because I was involved in our first contract negotiations 11-12 years ago. We had to fight hard to get DEQ employees flex and comp-time, and to protect everyone from changes that were being made to our salary classifications at a state level. We stopped the state from implementing 2-3 year freezes in step increases and the creation of sub-steps for new employees. We also got a good cost-of-living and range increases for over 60% of the employees including support staff, lab workers, VIP and others. These were top priority issues for employees. We've fought every contract to maintain good benefits and make additional gains.

Marti: I know a Fair Share employee pays dues but is not a member of the Union. Do Fair Share people have different rights? And what does Fair Share mean anyway?

Leslie: Fair Share means you choose not to become a member of the Union but you maintain all contractual benefits

and the right to a steward.

Doug: There are a couple of things about the difference in Fair Share and membership. Union members get to vote on our contract, officers, and a decision to strike; Fair Share employees do not. But, if your question is "Does a Union member get more rights than a Fair Share employee?" No, the Union negotiates benefits for all workers. All workers gets their fair share.

"LABOR FACTOID"

In 1998 people who worked in states allowing fair share payment of union dues, like Oregon, earned an average of \$5000 more per year than those in states that don't allow fair share.

Marti: So, if there is a strike, do Fair Share workers have to strike?

Leslie: No, in fact no one is forced to strike; but, a Fair Share worker would not be able to vote on a strike. What's important to all of us is that the more members we have, the stronger we are from a negotiating standpoint. Its just like an election. By analogy, a president will have more clout with congress if elected by a large majority

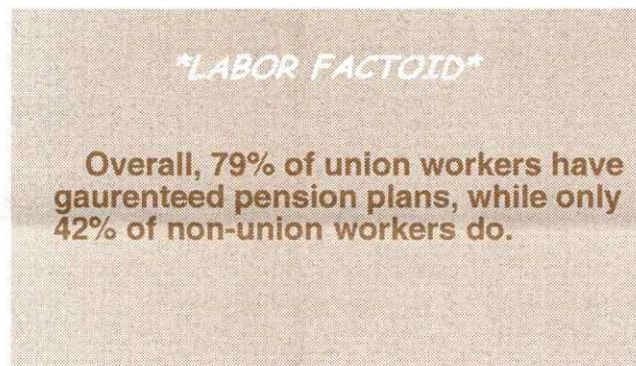
Doug: For example, currently we have about 70% membership. I cannot tell you how much stronger our negotiating position would be on our next contract if we had a higher percentage.

Marti: So, is that a good level of representation for public employee unions?

Doug: I'm not sure. In many trade unions the level is much higher.

Leslie: I think one of the challenges we have at DEQ is that our members are spread out all over the state. This makes communicating with all our members more difficult. I also have talked to a lot of Fair Share employees who like what the Union is doing but don't join the union for philosophical reasons. For example, some feel unions are for blue-collar workers, not professionals.

Marti: Well, that seems like a good point to me. I guess I don't feel like my job will get shipped to a Third World country.



Leslie: Your job may not get shipped out of the country, but there are other threats to your job for example, public employee jobs are being contracted out. Think about the effort by our legislature to privatize VIP. Public employee unions, representing many professionals, are currently among the fastest growing unions. AFSCME just organized hundreds of doctors in California who, like other health professionals, are experiencing loss of control over their jobs with privatization and managed care efforts

Look at the Boeing engineers, the airline pilots, teachers and many others. It doesn't matter any longer if your collar is blue, white or green; many more work-

ers are seeing the pie get smaller.

Doug: There's a Jim Hightower (political critic from Texas) quote that captures that idea, he says', "The economy is whizzing all right - whizzing right on you and me!"

Marti: Every month I have significant money taken out of my paycheck. I have a couple of questions about that. First, do we all pay the same amount?

Doug: Everyone pays 1% of his or her salary.

Marti: Okay, so where does it all go?

Doug: Twenty six percent goes to national AFSCME, and that helps to give us a voice in national and international issues, like elections, world trade and international worker issues. Also, some of that money comes back to the state. In recent years, the national office has provided large amounts of funding to Oregon because election after election we have faced ballot measures attacking public workers. Tell me, who is going to fight these measures if we don't?

Leslie: Fifty-six percent goes to the State Council; that money is used to hire state lobbyists, field representatives for all of the locals and other staff. And AFSCME Council 75 (the state organization) is spending one million this year fighting the ugly ballot measures that are out there. Union dues are not given to individual candidates. Money given to candidates through AFSCME is given strictly through voluntary contributions.

Doug: The State Council keeps an eye on our benefits. Here's an example:

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Recently PERS tried to pay off a past obligation by taking the funds out of PERS all in one swoop. This would have hurt all of us, particularly employees about to retire. There were better ways to do it. The Council's attorney was able to turn that around. This was something that most of us didn't have a clue was happening.

Marti: And I see about 7% goes to the Local. How is that used?

Leslie: This money is used for education and communication, for instance the newsletter, travel to other DEQ offices, and training for stewards. It is also used to pay for a member who must take time off work for Union business, for instance for a convention or an all day trip to other offices. We also make contributions to a couple of community-based workers organizations like Jobs with Justice - which has helped our local and other AFSCME locals in the past, and we pay dues to a couple of labor councils. But the majority goes to a strike fund.

Marti: You know none of us have a lot of time, so whether I'm a Fair Share employee or a card carrying Union member give me a couple of quick things I can do to help the Union.

Leslie: If you are a Fair Share member the first thing is to sign a membership card. Here is why: As Doug said, it makes us much stronger in our contract negotiations. Second, in Oregon strong unions send a powerful message to people like Bill Sizemore. Tell me, what stands between these initiatives and the impact on you and your family besides the union? And from a personal

standpoint, it shows support for your fellow DEQ employees who are taking the time to actively volunteer to be stewards and officers.

Doug: These are all important and I'd like to add that as environmentalists we all need to realize that ballot measures are twofold: first, they are aimed at reducing our benefits and at getting our jobs, and second, they are aimed weakening laws that protect the environment. I want to encourage people to register and to VOTE. I know that sounds basic but DEQ employees don't have the best record. Then I'd say talk to your family and friends about these initiatives. We will make sure in our next issue that everyone has some good facts.

If you like and want to keep your benefits, want to see that your wages keep pace with the private sector, and if you are concerned about threats to the environment, JOIN. I encourage any of you to call me or Leslie with questions, attend a union meeting, read our newsletter and visit our soon-to-be Web site.

Remember, the Union is our voice!

LABOR FACTOID

In 1980, 97% of full-time workers were covered by health benefits. In 1997, only 76% of full time workers were covered by health benefits.

What Has the Union Done For Me?

By Deborah Nesbit

When one looks at what the Union does for us, its important to remember that being in a union shop and part of a network of Union shops, gives us more than just quantifiable gains in our local every-other-year contracts. Public employees have been under attack for quite some time. Being organized offers us a measure of protection that may not be easily quantifiable but is real just the same. I believe that a society as a whole needs a strong public sector. Not everything is about private sector profit and loss.

What have Unions done for Me?

Our pioneer Union activists won a lot of protections that we take for granted today. For example:

- * A forty hour work week
- * An eight hour workday
- * The National Labor Relations Act of 1935
- * Collective bargaining rights
- * Child labor laws
- * Right to due process
- * Weingarten rights (Union representation)
- * Right to a safe workplace (OSHA)

What has AFSCME done for me at DEQ?

Here are some benefits that we enjoy as

a result of contract negotiation, or in a few cases, workgroups that the Union has participated in:

Contract and agency standards - Before our very first contract at DEQ, policy in the Agency was inconsistent at best. Depending on the section and supervisor, an employee could be subjected to wildly differing standards for performance and inconsistent management expectations (e.g., putting in uncompensated overtime). There was no recourse for the employee if the supervisor was arbitrary and unreasonable. With a contract in place, the entire Agency was held to the same standard and we got a chance to grieve injustice without fear of retaliation.

Flex and Comp Time - In our first contract, we got flextime and comp time (how many of us remember that prior to 1989, staff often worked overtime without compensation?). The union also stopped the state from creating sub-steps for new hires. We established a grievance procedure and instituted a classification appeals process.

Step Increases - In the 1st contract, over 60% got step increases as part of contract; in the most recent contract we got an 8th step added to help the over 50% of DEQ employees who were "topped out". We have also fought for and received cost-of-living increases in several contracts; increases which wouldn't have been given to us without a union.

Selective salary adjustments- Selective salary adjustments in every contract. For instance, in our 1997 contract the chemist, environmental engineer and several other classifications made gains

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of one or more ranges.

Health Benefits - Health benefits have been an issue every contract. Our Local has been successful in improving our health benefits contribution in each contract.

PERS Language - Replacement PERS language automatically converts the State's 6% pickup into a 6% base salary increase if another Measure 8 type law comes into effect.

Travel Allowance - We got rid of the differential in the travel allowance between management and staff. We also negotiated for CONUS rates (federal worker rates). This improved our maximum lodging amount.

Telecommuting - Telecommuting language was developed which applied this policy Agency-wide.

COLAs - Several cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs) have been gained by the union during years when the state wanted to offer lower COLAs or freeze COLAs altogether.

Moving Expenses - Increases in moving expense reimbursement and in mileage for use of private vehicles.

Leave Donation - The use of donated vacation or comp-time for employees who are out of sick leave or need bereavement leave.

Governor's Day & Personal Leave - Because Governor's Day is arbitrary and not a guaranteed holiday, we negotiated for a guaranteed annual Governor's Day whether it is officially

LABOR FACTOID

Since 1989, the incomes of the richest 5% of the population have gone up 22%.

called or not. For the life of the 1995-96 contract, an additional four hours personal leave.

Leadworker and Shift differential - Lead worker differential of 5% above current monthly based rate of pay. Improvements in the shift differential.

Other Items

- * Establishment of a labor/management Workload Committee.
- * A safety program with "required" safety equipment; personal protective equipment for VIP.
- * Employees given right to provide comments attached to performance appraisals and to request a revised appraisal based on comments and discussion with manager.
- * Professional difference of opinion article.
- * Article laying out the conditions for job sharing.
- * Development of criteria for being denied performance based pay - requiring written notification of deficiencies and/or disciplinary action prior to denial.
- * Clarification of layoff and seniority rights and designation of rights within region so that people would not be "bumped"

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to another geographical location.

What about the big picture in Oregon?

Ballot Measure 8 - Council 75 successfully fought (along with other Unions) to regain the PERS rights that were stripped from all public employees by BM 8.

VIP Round 1 - Council 75, with our help, stopped contracting out of VIP program (a first step to contracting out other parts of the Agency).

Minimum Wage - Council 75, organizations like Jobs with Justice, and other unions helped raise the minimum wage through a ballot initiative, thereby improving Oregon's economy and helping working families towards self-sufficiency.

Sizemore Attacks - Council 75, working in coalition with other unions, non-profits and its members continues to defend us against numerous Sizemore attacks.

This is just summary of some Local 3336 achievements and by no means the comprehensive list. Perhaps the greatest achievement in being organized is most difficult of all to quantify, because we can't know what would have been in the last ten years without the power that comes from being a work force that presents a united front. We have an opportunity to shape our futures, however by getting involved in the Union.

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Labor Day Holiday: Another First for Oregon

The Labor Day holiday, always the first Monday in September, honors the contributions tha all American workers make. The first Labor Day holiday was celebrated in 1882 by the workmen of the Central Labor Union in New York City. ***The Oregon State Legislature was the first state to pass a law recognizing the day as a holiday in 1887.*** In 1894 Congress passed an act making the first Monday in September a federal holiday. The yearly tribute will be celebrated in Portland at the annual labor picnic held at Oaks Park in Sellwood from 10am to 5pm. See you there!

LABOR FACTOID
In 1980, the average work week was 40 hours.
In 2000, the average work week is 43 hours.
Those extra 3 hours a week add up to one full month per year !



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