

EDITORIAL: DEMOCRATS TEE UP A GIFT FOR DONORS AT PUBLIC'S EXPENSE

The Oregonian Editorial Board, March 9, 2025

From the desk of



Representative Christine Drazan

Democrats have taken supermajorities in both chambers of the Legislature and control of all five statewide offices, due in part to millions in donations from labor unions. It seems the spirit of payback – funded with others' money, of course – is running high.

Democratic legislators are pushing a bill that would allow employees who strike to be eligible for unemployment benefits. [Senate Bill 916](#), introduced on behalf of the AFL-CIO and headed for a vote by the full Senate, would allow striking workers at public and private employers to start collecting benefits after two weeks. No other state in the country allows public employees to receive unemployment benefits while on strike – Oregon would be the first.

Cue a collective sigh from Oregonians who have heard that too many times.

The costs are potentially significant for private employers and possibly debilitating for public agencies. The [unemployment insurance fund](#), currently \$6.4 billion, is supported by a tax on private companies that varies in part by how much the company uses it. Public employers who lay off workers must reimburse the fund for every dollar in benefits issued to their employees.

Not surprisingly, businesses and organizations representing public agencies including the League of Oregon Cities, Oregon Association of Counties and Oregon School Boards Association are opposing the measure. For good reason. As Angela Wilhelms of Oregon Business and Industry noted, the bill is “just irreconcilable” with the intent of unemployment insurance to protect those left jobless through no fault of their own.

Going on strike is a voluntary action. While workers may have legitimate criticisms of an employer's contract offer, the decision to go on strike is a calculated effort to exert additional pressure. It comes with risks, as such a high-stakes tactic should, because actions that shut down a hospital, school district or other operations have an impact on people far beyond the workers or employer.

Getting laid off, however, is not voluntary. Just ask the thousands of federal employees, Intel workers and OHSU employees who lost their jobs in the past several months. These are the people for whom unemployment benefits have been reserved and should remain so. Especially with the uncertainty of federal actions and the headwinds facing Oregon's biggest industries, protecting the unemployment fund for those with no option to return to work is of critical importance.

Backers of the bill argue that SB 916 protects workers from having to succumb to an employer's offer in an extended strike, as [The Oregonian/OregonLive's Sami Edge reported](#). The strike pay that workers receive from their union is typically far lower than their usual paycheck. Unemployment benefits, however, which range from \$200 to more than \$800 a week, can help make up the difference.

But the backers assume, wrongly, that it is in employers' interest to prolong a strike. Strikes cost employers a premium in pay for temporary workers and often erode public support. At times, employers may also end up having to provide back pay for the striking workers. There are existing processes to resolve impasses or accusations of unfair practices. These factors all help both sides negotiate in good faith.

The bill, however, would upend that dynamic and put all the power in employees' hands, regardless of whether an employer can meet their demands. Just consider the 2023 Portland Public Schools' teachers strike in which the union was asking for [concessions far beyond anything](#) the district could afford. Even the approved contract has [forced the district](#) to cut positions to pay for it, but the need to get students back in school after a full month off was a compelling motivation to get to a compromise.

As [Willamette Week reported](#), had an earlier version of this bill been in effect during that strike, the unemployment benefits would have cost PPS \$8.7 million.

The bill, which passed last week out of the Senate Committee on Labor and Business, now includes a provision that would allow school districts to subtract an employee's unemployment insurance benefits from any back pay or other pay they receive as part of a contract agreement. But that provision introduces a high level of administrative work to verify the correct payments for potentially thousands of striking employees. This clumsy attempt to fix a gaping hole only reinforces how flawed this bill is.

Here's another gaping hole. David Gerstenfeld, the director of the Oregon Employment Department, estimated that the bill, had it been in effect over the past 10 years, would have cost the unemployment insurance fund only \$4.4 million. But he admitted at last week's work session that his agency has no idea if workers will be more likely to strike or will strike for longer periods if they can receive unemployment benefits in the meantime. What an enormous gamble that the [three committee members](#) who voted yes – Sen. Kathleen Taylor, D-Portland; Sen. Khanh Pham, D-Portland; and Sen. Aaron Woods, D- Sherwood, are willing to make with other people's money.

The rest of the Senate should not be so cavalier. They should remember who they serve and vote down SB 916.

-The Oregonian/OregonLive Editorial Board