

Service Employees International Union – Oregon State Council

525 NE Oregon St. Portland, OR 97232

 To: Senate Committee on Labor and Business
From: Mike Powers, Immediate Past President, Political & Policy Strategist SEIU Local 503
Date: February 11, 2025

RE: Support for SB 916

Dear Chair Taylor, Vice-Chair Bonham, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Mike Powers. I am here on behalf of the SEIU State Council in strong support of Senate Bill 916. This bill ensures that workers forced to strike can access unemployment benefits, allowing them to provide for their families during labor disputes. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

SEIU Oregon represents more than 85,000 hardworking Oregonians—caregivers, wildland firefighters, road crews, tax collectors, food safety inspectors, custodians, security officers, and many others. While some of these workers have the legal right to strike, others do not. Those who do only resort to striking as a last option, after exhausting negotiations and facing repeated employer refusals to provide fair wages, safe working conditions, or basic benefits.

Historically, labor struggles in the late 19th and early 20th centuries led to an implicit social compact between workers and employers – one based on fair compensation, job security, and respect in the workplace. Today, that compact is broken. Corporations and wealthy nonprofits increasingly rely on temporary and contract work, slash pensions, raise healthcare costs, hire professional union busters, and suppress wages. In the mid-1960s, the CEO-to-worker pay ratio was approximately 20-to-1. By 2020, that gap had widened to an estimated 350-to-1. Since 1978, CEO compensation has skyrocketed by over 1,000%, while the average worker's pay has grown by only 24%.

So, large corporations and well-funded nonprofits have the financial means to outlast striking workers, who must make enormous personal and financial sacrifices. Employers can even revoke health insurance during a strike, making it even more critical that workers have access to unemployment benefits to help cover healthcare and other essential needs.

Expanding unemployment insurance (UI) to striking workers aligns with the program's fundamental purpose – protecting workers from unsafe, exploitative, or substandard jobs. Providing UI would strengthen workforce retention, improve job satisfaction, and raise workplace standards while ensuring employers engage in fair negotiations. In the long run, this would reduce both the frequency and duration of strikes.

Recent labor disputes have shown that many employers can afford to simply wait out striking workers, further tipping the scales against working people. SB 916 helps restore fairness. Working people are the backbone of our economy – they deserve a level playing field and the ability to support their families. For these reasons, SEIU Oregon urges your support for SB 916. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mike Powers

Immediate Past President Political and Policy Strategist SEIU Oregon State Council