

3/4/2025

Chair Taylor and members of the Senate Committee on Labor and Business. Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with my testimony today regarding SB916. Below is the testimony I had prepared for today along with my thoughts after hearing the proposed amendments and expert information from being present today.

My name is Becky Routson. My connection to this bill: I am a nurse and the Union Chair at one of my places of employment. I am speaking on my own behalf and not as representing my membership at large only to the point that I have not ascertained a majority of their opinions on this topic.

I would like to share that I have communicated with a number of nurses from 2 Oregon facilities, in which the nurses are unionized, and I asked: “What are your thoughts on the current bill providing striking workers with access to unemployment compensation?”. Shockingly 100% said they do not support this bill (I had additional feedback from 2 other units today that were 80% opposed and 20% in favor). 7 nursing units, 2 facilities. These nurses have a wide range of views and all are union members. When I asked them what support they would like to have from the state legislature **they asked for you to consider protections for their health insurance while on strike**. This is their main ask: employers to be accountable to payments on the health insurance benefits of striking workers and not hold hostage health insurance as a negotiation tactic. More than wages they are concerned for their, and their families, health insurance. The other ask: **hold union organizations accountable to use a portion of our union dues in a strike fund**. I’ll expand a little on both of those points

1. **Healthcare benefits.** The nurses I talked to from the Providence strike said they were more shocked and worried about losing their healthcare benefits when Providence said they would no longer be paying healthcare premiums (I think that was 4 weeks into the strike?). Nurses said they anticipated the wages but the squeeze on benefits was shocking. Nurses were worried about reapplying for health benefits, questioned if they or their families would be labeled with pre-existing condition clauses, and if their benefit rates would increase. Holding employers accountable to continuing health benefits would not be a cost to the state as unemployment benefits would be. Protecting our benefits has the potential to be a larger asset for striking workers especially since some unions are good about having strike funds.
2. **Strike Funds:** My union, ONA, boasts 15,000 members and for the sake of math I’ll use \$100/month (I pay just over that) The rate of dues is 1% of our base pay of a full time worker who's been there 3 years whether the worker is full time or part time (I am part time at this employer). 15,000 members in ONA x \$100 a month is \$18,000,000. \$2 a month goes to one political fund and \$3 a month goes to another fund so approximately

900,000. ONA tax forms from 2022 say \$11,000,000 for revenue I believe and says there were 87 employees. By requiring a strike fund for the non-profit union organizations it would decrease the cost to the state in administration of unemployment benefits and it would un muddy the waters of what to do with retro pay. I heard in the hearing that it was rare for retro/back pay. I chair our union and in December 2024 we finished 9 months of bargaining and received bonus pay once the contract was ratified; we worked under our expired contract for 5 months. Providence received retro pay instead of a bonus. In our negotiations over the table we negotiated the wording of our back pay as a bonus to make the administration of the pay easier to calculate and in return we received a larger sum by saving the administration the time of calculating hours of back pay. There are so many nuances to this. A strike fund that is managed by the specific union organization seems to me more accountable to the dues we pay, specific to the workers, and less of a burden on the state. A strike fund would also be easier to access for workers than applying for unemployment. I applied for unemployment during the pandemic and although the system was over burdened at that time it was difficult to maneuver. My 20 year old son who works in machine labor tried to access unemployment last year and found it so difficult he just gave up. If he was on strike and his union had a strike fund, the ease of accessing a strike fund would be helpful during the stressful time of striking.

Personally here are points of my own perspective of which some have been influenced by conversations I have had within my union membership.

1. In 2024, union members accounted for 15.9% of wage and salary workers in Oregon. **Providing access to unemployment wages to 15.9% of workers in a circumstance that the other 84.1% of Oregon workers do not have access to is appalling and a gross negligence to equity work in the state.** As stated in the Oregon Center for Public Policy written by Kathy Lara, “More than 116,000 Oregon agricultural and domestic workers — disproportionately immigrant and workers of color — are not covered by the NLRA, National Labor Relations Act, and lack long-established organizing rights. Independent contractors, or “gig workers,” are also excluded. They too are more likely to be workers of color.” Lara writes that **Unemployment Insurance access for strike workers could help lift a barrier to unionization and be a catalyst inspiring organization of unionization but I personally feel the point is missed. Providing access to unemployment benefits to striking workers before addressing barriers to unionization is absurd and puts the cart before the horse and leaves marginalized members of the workforce to do the hard work of organizing without lifting other barriers first. You’re asking them to climb a mountain barefoot with no protections from the forces that are working against their progress** (like the unfair practices employers use to pressure workers to not unionize that are actively trying to unionize) Only 54% of the employee groups who filed to unionize actually achieved their goal.

Considering protections as in “Just Cause” rather than “at will” employment was another point in Lara’s paper and this step should 100% be advocated for by members prior to providing an unequal distribution to access to unemployment..

<https://www.ocpp.org/2024/04/30/labor-activity-increased-barriers-unionizing/>

2. From another lens this bill contradicts the purpose of unemployment insurance, which is designed for those who are involuntarily unemployed and actively seeking work. Myself and others believe that striking workers have a right to return to their jobs, which differentiates their situation from those who are laid off or terminated without cause. A [May 2024 report](#) from the U.S. Department of Labor describes the social insurance program as “designed to provide benefits to most individuals out of work, generally through no fault of their own, for periods between jobs,” and states that “to be eligible for benefits, jobless workers ... must be able and available for work, and must be actively seeking work.” At the core of eligibility is whether work is available and whether the employee chooses not to come to work. So, if a strike occurs and the employer continues to operate, historically, striking employees are ineligible for UI benefits. I believe the goal of this bill is to equalize the power gap union workers face when they do not have access to wages due to withholding labor. Although this bill could help this power gap I do not believe providing unemployment wages is the only way to address the power gap and in doing so the fundamental foundation of unemployment is not met. Ways to increase unionized workers power would be to require employers to maintain health benefits for striking workers and require union organizations to maintain strike funds.

Questions you had or answered:

1. Does this bill include a waiting period for applying for/receiving benefits? The waiting period in New York and New Jersey is 14 days. A recent report stated that 84% of strikes are resolved within this 14 day window. Again another point that this bill is a minimal effort to addressing the barriers that prevent unionization and fair practices for workers.
2. Do you have a map that shows a percentage of workers (union/non-union) that would have access to unemployment wages? Is there disparity? Would rural workers, and NRLA workers who historically have less access to assistance be disproportionately unable to access such provisions that unionized workers would have?

I appreciate considerations that feel this bill would promote fair bargaining practices by ensuring financial protections for employees and protect workers at minimal cost to the state since the monies are provided from employers and federal funds unless the burden on the unemployment system is great (like on boarding 5000 providence workers in a week?).

Providing unemployment compensation to striking workers prior to tearing down barriers to those trying to unionize is hard for me to fathom: a state like Oregon who prides itself on equity would provide access to a small group of workers while others face so many barriers to unionizing . You are putting the cart before the horse; using a carrot and a stick. Decrease the barriers workers have to unionizing before providing this benefit to only 15.9% of workers.

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