

Submitter: Ryan Sotomayor  
On Behalf Of:  
Committee: House Committee On Labor and Workplace Standards  
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB916

In early 2023, the Portland City Laborers' members of LIUNA Local 483 went out on a three day strike following 10 months of difficult negotiations with the City. 483 members at the City worked tirelessly to keep many of Portland's vital services and operations running throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic to help support the needs of our community, many working in jobs that inherently preclude any possibility for remote work. Laborers continued their essential work in transportation, wastewater treatment, as well as operation and maintenance of facilities and core infrastructure throughout the city that community members rely on every day. Portland City Laborers also worked in community centers with county employees and outside partners that were used as temporary shelters for unhoused city residents. Members agreed to economic concessions during the COVID crisis to prevent layoffs yet, unfortunately, that good-faith spirit went largely unrecognized and unreciprocated once contract negotiations later began. Members went through months of bargaining to address scheduled wages, increases, benefits, cost of living, worker safety, and many other concerns.

Ultimately, the decision to strike was not considered lightly and members spent months in addition to direct bargaining with a mediator to try and reach a resolution with the city of Portland. In order to ultimately weigh the decision to strike, members held a democratic "strike vote" to ensure that all workers' voices were heard to determine this direction, due to the immense sacrifices involved. If you asked our members about going on strike, many would say that their hands were forced by the employer.

I am submitting testimony in support of Senate Bill 916 to end the exclusion of Unemployment Insurance benefits for workers when they are on strike in Oregon.

We know that there can be a fundamental power imbalance in this country between employers and workers—a gap that many Portland City Laborers experienced first-hand during this experience. While employers are paid throughout the bargaining process and can choose to "wait out" employees, workers can be forced to make increasingly difficult choices. If employers can remove healthcare access from striking workers, workers should be able to receive unemployment benefits to help with COBRA costs and more. During and after the strike, the local union supported many different members with connecting to community assistance resources and safety net services, some of which were not available to them while they were on strike. We also assisted members with food insecurity, utilities, and, in some cases, mortgage and rental assistance.

Providing workers access to unemployment insurance during a strike like the one that Portland City Laborers went through could have ensured a greater degree of financial stability while workers were advocating for improved working conditions. Having this law in place would have served to help rebalance the power dynamics with the employer and better reinforce an ongoing environment of good-faith negotiations with workers to reach a fair outcome.

This policy comes at an extremely low cost to the UI fund and has minimal impact on employers. In the rare cases of public sector strikes, the ability to access UI benefits will make a meaningful difference for workers.

Passing SB 916 will lead to fairer negotiations, shorter strikes, and a more balanced bargaining process. Oregon workers deserve this basic protection.