

Testimony in Support of SB 916
Oregon School Employees Association (OSEA)
April 2025

Chair Grayber, Vice Chairs Munoz and Elmer, and Members of the Committee,

For the record, my name is Willis Homann, and I am a Government Relations Specialist with the Oregon School Employees Association (OSEA), which represents more than 25,000 classified education workers across our state's public schools, community colleges, Head Starts, and education service districts.

OSEA stands in support of Senate Bill 916, which would ensure that workers are not disqualified from receiving unemployment insurance (UI) benefits if they are unemployed due to a labor dispute in active progress at their place of employment.

While it is important to note that OSEA has gone on strike just once in the 87 years since the association's establishment in 1938, we recognize that labor disputes, though rare and always a last resort, can become necessary to ensure fair working conditions, especially when negotiations reach an impasse. The decision to strike is never taken lightly, and it reflects the deep frustration and urgency felt by workers when they believe their voices are not being heard.

SB 916 does not encourage strikes, but rather acknowledges the economic realities that workers face when caught in labor disputes. Denying unemployment insurance in these situations disproportionately penalizes working families who are already sacrificing income to stand up for better conditions, not only for themselves but often for the communities they serve. Allowing workers on strike to collect unemployment benefits is a monumental step toward achieving a more equitable power dynamic between workers and school districts and it will prevent district administrators and superintendents from exploiting the reality that our members cannot afford to strike when it comes to reaching fair contract negotiations.

For classified school employees, the stakes in these disputes are often high, affecting staffing, safety, and the ability to support students effectively. We believe that providing a safety net through UI during labor disputes promotes a fairer balance between employers and employees/classified workers and school districts and can reduce the harmful long-term consequences that strikes can have on working families. What's perhaps most critical to consider is that this safety net is temporary and only capable of stretching so far. As UI benefits equate to a small fraction of what are already poverty wages, many of the folks making the wages of OSEA members do wouldn't be able to use them to cover more than a grocery store trip or a utility bill. Folks making these wages would be far from capable of



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surviving off UI alone. Nonetheless, when breakdowns in negotiations occur and lead to the difficult decision to strike, it is crucial that workers have a safeguard to cover at least *some* of their financial obligations. After all, *any* sort of cushioning makes a difference during times of financial hardship, especially when a worker is sacrificing their livelihood to improve the systems they work within.

Thank you for your consideration, and we respectfully urge an aye vote on SB 916.

Sincerely,
Willis Homann

Government Relations Specialist
Oregon School Employees Association (OSEA)

