

College, Hatchery Workers Participate in Union 'Unity Breaks'

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Unity Breaks

Pam Carl, member mobilization coordinator for AFSCME Council 28, talks with union employees about needed pay increases. Demonstrations were held throughout the state on Wednesday to call the Legislature to end the stalemate on state workers' negotiated 4.8 percent pay raises.

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College, Hatchery Workers Participate in Union 'Unity Breaks' By Justyna Tomtas / jtomtas@chronline.com | 0 comments

State workers throughout Washington participated in demonstrations their union called "unity breaks" Wednesday, calling on the Legislature to end a stalemate in negotiations for pay raises.

Two locations in Lewis County joined more than 80 other work sites to spread the word and help garner support for the movement.

At Centralia College, a group of state workers met near the clock tower to help raise awareness of the issue. Wearing green shirts emblazoned with "We are the safety net" and holding signs in support of increased wages, many were on their lunch break.

Pam Carl, member mobilization coordinator for AFSCME Council 28, said state workers have not received a cost of living raise in over seven years. The council is part of Washington Federation of State Employees, a member-driven union with a stated mission to organize and empower individuals to help achieve and maintain fair wages.

“(Legislators) accepted an 11 percent increase for themselves, but said no to a 4.8 percent state employee increase for two years. That’s not right,” Carl said.

Centralia College employs approximately 100 classified staff who are part of the union's bargaining unit. Carl said the demonstrations throughout Washington were the first organized events since a wave of rolling strikes in 2001.

“We really want to tell the Senate that an investment in state workers is an investment in the community,” Carl said, adding that employees who earn a higher rate will funnel more money back into their local communities.

Currently, about one-third of the bargaining members in the group work at or below the poverty line, she claimed.

Along with pay cuts, decreases in furlough days and increased health care costs, state employees continue to struggle without any cost of living increases, Carl said.

Shelley Snelson, who works for admissions and registration at the college, said the campus has seen a lot of changes throughout the years. Employees have had to work hard to make ends meet, she said.

“They want to take health care away from our spouses, they haven’t given us all the raises that we were promised years ago, and we have more work. I just think we earned it,” Snelson said.

The state Department of Fish and Wildlife Cowlitz Salmon Hatchery, located in Salkum, also took part in the unity breaks.

Larona Newhouse, the manager of the hatchery, said her staff of eight spoke with union representatives during their lunch hour.

“They are trying to show the legislators that it’s important to keep hatcheries going,” she said, mentioning talks of health care changes as well. “It’s nice to know the union is trying to have our best interest here.”

Currently, entry level hatchery workers earn \$11.09 an hour. Newhouse said it isn’t enough, stating that employees have college degrees and are being underpaid.

She said the hatchery industry is looking for support from the Legislature.

“There are a lot of people in this state that support state hunting and fishing. In order for them to continue to enjoy those things, you have to have your workers,” she said.

The majority of the demonstrations throughout Washington lasted between 15 and 30 minutes and took place during lunch or breaks. The effort was coordinated by the 40,000-member Washington Federation of State Employees/AFSCME. The Seattle area saw the most unity breaks, with 14 in all.