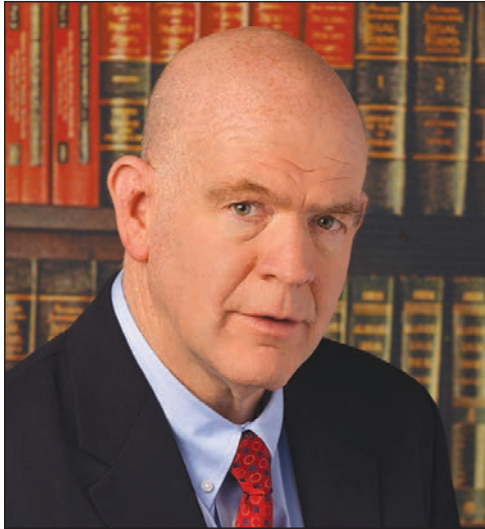


OPEIU CONNECT

Issue 559, Winter 2025



Solidarity!



We Will Rise to the Occasion

By Richard Lanigan
President

Since the national election I have read articles, listened to commentaries and had many conversations. The general sense I get is concern the pendulum is moving and how the rules of the workplace are enforced will favor management for the next few years. Project 2025 tells us to expect this.

This is not the first time management has found itself with new authority in the workplace after a government sympathetic to its needs has been elected, and it will not be the last. When this has occurred in the past, working people and unions had to rise to the occasion. When they did, they emerged stronger and wiser. A look at history will illustrate the point.

The Industrial Revolution concentrated great amounts of wealth in the hands of a small number of America's industrialists; so much so the period was called the "Gilded Age," a reference to a Mark Twain novel of the same name. The book describes Washington of that time as filled with robber baron industrialists and the politicians who worked with them. Pay was low, and working hours could be seven days a week for more than 10 hours per day. It was a time before workplace safety rules. Conditions were dangerous. Those who banded together with others to change their workplace were branded radicals and, in some cases, treated as outlaws.

Facing terrible conditions and fierce resistance, people with far fewer resources than we have marched, picketed and started to organize. Coal miners found

themselves, literally, in armed combat with management, made even more contentious when government sided with management. But working people continued to march, rally and picket. In time, Congress passed labor laws supporting laborers' rights to form unions. Congress then adopted laws prohibiting child labor and establishing the 40-hour work week with overtime pay when more than 40 hours are worked. Congress also enacted civil service laws eliminating the corrupt spoils system in government. All this was achieved by people who faced intense resistance from those who wanted to keep the status quo or make management stronger.

Not long after, management went to work to weaken the new labor laws. In a management-sponsored push, Congress enacted the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, which paved the way for so-called right-to-work laws. It limited unions' rights to support members of other unions when picketing their employer over a workplace dispute. Again, working people responded by organizing. Soon more than 10 million people belonged to unions.

Realizing court and agency decisions had weakened the NLRA and penalties for violations were limited to back wages, as compared to damage remedies provided in civil lawsuits, management violations increased.

Again, unions responded by transforming themselves to better represent their members and organize working people

more effectively than ever before. Today thousands of people risk their jobs to form unions to make their workplaces better.

We saw it recently in Michigan and Missouri, where legislators working with groups representing managements' interests enacted right-to-work laws. In both cases working people mobilized and repealed the laws. Today neither state has a right-to-work law.

By now, you must see a pattern. When management teams up with government to strengthen managements' hands in the workplace, working people and unions respond.

So, as people express concern about whether a new administration will impact life in the workplace or hurt unions, my answer is, in the short term another attempt will be made to make management more profitable and more powerful. But in the long term unions, including your union, will do what they do best, fight to protect working people, push to improve quality of working life and strive to secure a dignified retirement for life's work. In the long term working people and their unions will achieve this.

It will not be easy. But working people will once again need to rise to the occasion. History shows us when you live in a democracy it takes people acting together to accomplish change to improve the workplace and the quality of life.

The way you can get involved is by getting active in your local union.

OPEIU Celebrates the Life of Nancy Wohlforth

OPEIU is celebrating the life and legacy of Nancy Wohlforth, a pioneering labor leader and gay rights activist who served as the union's secretary-treasurer for many years. Wohlforth died Dec. 31 at the age of 79.

For her entire life, Wohlforth was an activist for the rights of working people and a warrior in the fight for racial and gender justice. As fearless as she was dedicated, she broke down barrier after barrier throughout her career. One of the first openly gay labor leaders in the United States, Wohlforth served as OPEIU secretary-treasurer from Jan. 1, 2003, until her retirement Jan. 1, 2010. Previously, Wohlforth was a member of the OPEIU Executive Board while serving as business manager/secretary-treasurer of Local 3 (Region V) in San Francisco.

Wohlforth graduated from Columbia University with a master's degree in American history. While at Columbia, she participated in the famed 1968 protests and sit-ins of the university's complicity with the Vietnam War and its plans to build a gymnasium widely opposed in the nearby community. As a high school student in 1964, she took part in Freedom Summer — before the passage of the Voting Rights Act — to register Black voters in Mississippi.

A powerful voice in the fight for gay rights, particularly in the workplace, Wohlforth was a founding member and former president of Pride at Work (PAW), the LGBTQIA+ constituency group of union activists affiliated with the AFL-CIO. Through PAW and beyond, she dedicated herself to ensuring equality for all LGBTQIA+ individuals in their workplaces, unions and communities, and to creating a labor movement that promotes diversity and inclusion while ensuring dignity and respect for all working people. Representing PAW in 2005 she became the first openly LGBTQIA+ member of the AFL-CIO Executive Council, the federation's governing body.

Within the union movement, she was a pioneer. She served as an executive board member of the San Francisco Labor Council, AFL-CIO, and as vice president of the California Labor Federation, AFL-CIO. She was a founder of U.S. Labor Against the War and the Labor Campaign for Single-Payer Health Care.



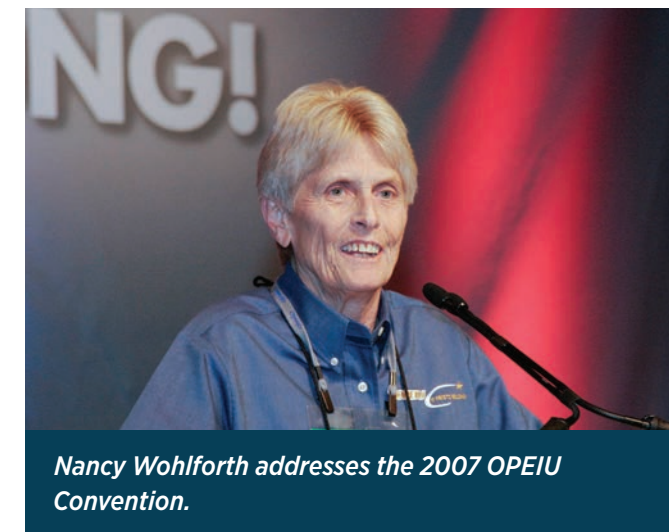
"I got the chance to build this union of ours, and to fight for things we believe in like health care for all, domestic partner benefits and social justice."

Reflecting on her years in the labor movement, Wohlforth once said, "Retiring from OPEIU is so hard to do because I've had a love affair with this union since 1978 when I started out with OPEIU Local 3. And, as secretary-treasurer, I've had the most difficult, most exciting job of my life. I got the chance to build this union of ours, and to fight for things we believe in like health care for all, domestic partner benefits and social justice."

She warmly remembered "the thousands of OPEIU members who have marched with me, organized with me, lobbied with me, rallied with me, negotiated with me, joked with me, befriended me, hugged me and most of all, have been with me" through it all.

Wohlforth is survived by Denice Lombard, her wife and partner of more than 43 years. "Every single thing I've done in this union — every single thing I am in life — is because of her," Wohlforth once said.

OPEIU remembers Wohlforth and is forever grateful to her for all she accomplished on behalf of the union and its members. A celebration of life will be held in the spring in Washington, D.C.



Nancy Wohlforth addresses the 2007 OPEIU Convention.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Assisting Those Affected by Wildfires

Local 11 members employed at NW Natural in Oregon and Washington states headed south to assist in restoration of gas service for customers in the Malibu/Pacific Palisades areas of Los Angeles affected by the wildfires.

We are so grateful to the 20 members for their willingness to volunteer during this time of great need. Their dedication and commitment to helping the community are truly commendable.

Local 11 extends its thanks to all who volunteered for their support and readiness to assist.

Howard Bell
Executive Officer/Secretary-Treasurer
Local 11 (Region VI)
Vancouver, Washington

Scholarship Appreciation

Thank you so much for awarding me one of the Howard Coughlin Memorial Scholarships! It will be so beneficial to my education and life, and I appreciate the generous contribution! Thanks again.

Troy Ruetz
Local 792 (Region VII)
Toledo, Ohio



Local 11 members at NW Natural in Oregon and Washington states travel to Los Angeles to assist those impacted by wildfires.

Editor's Note: If you also would like to help your fellow OPEIU members impacted by the Los Angeles wildfires, contributions can be sent to the OPEIU Member Disaster Relief Fund:

*Mary Mahoney
Secretary-Treasurer
OPEIU
P.O. Box 1761
New York, NY 10113
RE: OPEIU Member Disaster Relief Fund*

OPEIU CONNECT
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RICHARD LANIGAN
President

MARY MAHONEY
Secretary-Treasurer

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Local 4873's John Brenton IV Named to OPEIU Executive Board

John Brenton IV, secretary-treasurer of the Industrial, Technical and Professional Employees Union (ITPEU)/OPEIU Local 4873, has been named a vice president on the OPEIU Executive Board. He represents the union's Region III, which encompasses much of the Southeast, and will serve the unexpired vice-presidential term of ITPEU/OPEIU Local 4873 President Dennis R. Arrington.



John Brenton IV

"It is the honor of a lifetime to serve as an OPEIU vice president," Brenton said. "I look forward to serving the members in this new capacity and working with OPEIU's leadership."

A fourth-generation union member, Brenton's great-grandfather, grandfather and father were all merchant seamen and active members of the National Maritime Union. His mother was the daughter of a unionized bookbinder and New York City transit mechanic. She was an OPEIU member at the National Maritime Union's Joseph Curran building on Seventh Avenue in NYC, which is where Brenton's parents first met.

With this strong union background, Brenton grew up believing in the value of the labor movement. After several years working as a pipefitter, he began his full-time work for the ITPEU in 2007. Before his election as secretary-treasurer, he served as a business agent, organizer and assistant to the president.

Brenton is ITPEU's vice co-chair on all three of ITPEU's multi-employer benefits plans. He lives in Georgia with his wife and their four children.

Gratitude to Dennis Arrington for Many Years of Service to OPEIU Executive Board

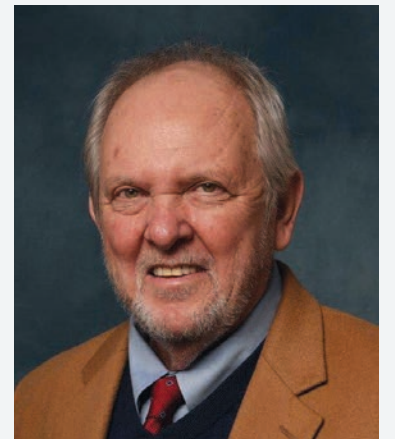
OPEIU extends its deep gratitude to Dennis R. Arrington, president of ITPEU/OPEIU Local 4873 (Region III), for his many years of service as a vice president on the OPEIU Executive Board.

Arrington has served on the OPEIU Executive Board since 2013 and was pivotal in the implementation of many of the union's key initiatives during his service. He has served as president of ITPEU/OPEIU Local 4873 since Dec. 2012. He began his union career in 1974, when he joined the National Maritime Union (NMU) as a United States Merchant Marine and sailed throughout Asia, Africa and Southern Europe.

Prior to joining ITPEU in 1983 as a representative in Galveston, Texas, Arrington was a NMU business agent and union activist.

Arrington has served many ITPEU locations throughout the country for three decades, rising through the ranks as representative, director of organizing, vice president and secretary-treasurer. He has organized thousands of employees throughout the U.S. at various government and private sector locations, working with representatives to build the organization to more than 10,000 current members.

Prior to his union service, Arrington served during the Vietnam era in the U.S. Navy from 1967 to 1971, where he received various commendations, including the Navy Achievement Medal by the Secretary of the Navy for meritorious achievement during combat support operations.



Dennis R. Arrington

INSIDE



On our cover: By standing together in solidarity, nurses at Kapi'olani Medical Center for Women and Children represented by the Hawai'i Nurses' Association (HNA)/OPEIU Local 50 (Region VIII) weathered two unfair labor practice strikes and an employer lockout to ratify a historic new contract that includes the state's first contractually enforceable safe staffing ratios, a major priority for more than 600 nurses at the medical center! Read more about it in our page 10 cover story, "Kapi'olani Nurses Win Historic Contract."

Congrats to OPEIU Scholarship WinnersPage 6

Black History Month ReflectionsPage 8

IRC Workers Organize NationwidePage 12

Steward Spotlight: Building Union Power in the Public SectorPage 19

Congrats to OPEIU Scholarship Winners

Congratulations to recipients of the 2024 OPEIU Scholarships. OPEIU awards numerous scholarships annually to further the education of members and their families. All are encouraged to apply.

Higher education scholarship opportunities include the Howard Coughlin Memorial Scholarship—available to OPEIU members, associate members and dependents—and the John Kelly Labor Studies Scholarship, available to members and associate members pursuing a degree in labor studies, industrial relations or union leadership and administration.

Howard Coughlin Memorial Scholarship: Full-Time Winners



Stacie Kohan
DAG 2007A
Region I



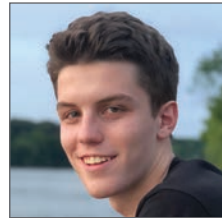
Grace Steinmetz
Local 6
Region II



Joseph Leonardi
Local 32
Region II



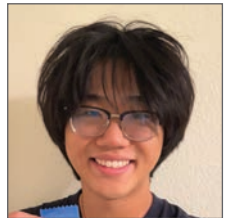
Megan Gallagher
Local 153
Region II



Ethan Kimball
Local 102
Region III



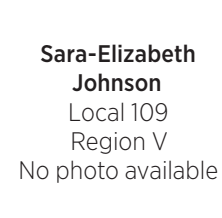
Jacob Jaramillo
Local 251
Region IV



Jacob Chan
Local 29
Region V



Jonah Palalay
Local 30
Region V



Sara-Elizabeth Johnson
Local 109
Region V
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Ashlin McCurdy
Local 8
Region VI
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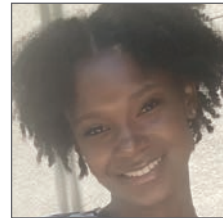


Troy Ruetz
Local 792
Region VII

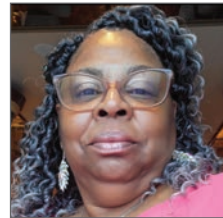


Logan Smith
Local 50
Region VIII

Howard Coughlin Memorial Scholarship: Part-Time Winners



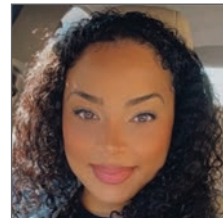
Layla Minor
Local 2
Region II



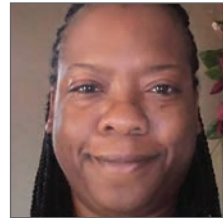
Denise Moore
Local 4873
Region III



Ceyli Orrego
Local 174
Region V

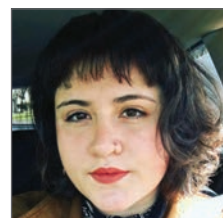


Janay Patterson
Local 8
Region VI



Shakia Davis
Local 2002
Region VII

John Kelly Labor Studies Scholarship



Sofia Cardenas
Local 29
Region V



Scan the QR code for more information and 2025 scholarship applications, or visit opeiu.org and click on the **Member Resources** tab. Once there, click the **Union Scholarships** link.

Student Debt Reduction Recipients Announced

Annually, OPEIU provides five awards of \$2,500 each to help members reduce student debt through the OPEIU Student Debt Reduction Program. The 2024 recipients are Anna Ingram, Local 11 (Region VI); Cecilia Aguilera, Local 29 (Region V); Ana Castillo, Local 32 (Region II); Grace Malone, Local 39 (Region VII); and Alessia Hughes, Local 453 (Region II).

OPEIU members with at least \$10,000 in student debt can apply each year. For more information, visit opeiu.org, click the **Member Resources** tab and then the **OPEIU Membership Benefits** link.

OPEIU Kids Enjoy Summer Camp



OPEIU's Romeo Corbeil/Gilles Beaugard Scholarship Fund summer camp welcomed OPEIU members' children in 2024. The one-week camp was held in Little Rock, Arkansas, where participants learned about the labor movement while enjoying fun summer activities such as camping, boating and swimming.

Get the OPEIU App Today

The OPEIU app is available for free download. It's a great way to stay connected to your union, learn more about your membership benefits, find links to OPEIU's social media networks and much more. Available for free download for iOS devices on the App Store and for Android devices on Google Play by searching **OPEIU**.



Black History Month Reflections

In commemoration of Black History Month, OPEIU Connect spoke with four members about the importance of Black history, its connection with labor history and how it has impacted their own working lives.

Q: WHAT DOES BLACK HISTORY MONTH MEAN TO YOU?

Denise Moore: Black History Month is a time when we honor the history, the achievements and the gifts of African Americans. We recognize some of their stories, focus on their education and what they brought to the history of the United States. We also reflect on the struggles they had and share their stories and praises. It is a time to uplift and continue to work toward their value, rights and opportunities to be treated as equals.

Raya Fagg: It is an opportunity for everyone to learn about the richness and the contributions of African Americans in this country. It also allows adults to remember or recall things they may have forgotten as children.

Glenda Armstrong: It means a time of remembrance. A time to celebrate those who have pioneered. Remembering and honoring those who went before us, who paved the way for us to be where we are today. Understanding our culture, our traditions and not forgetting who we are as a people.

Tamua Newton: Black History Month is a time to honor the resilience, achievements and contributions of Black people throughout history, while reflecting on the struggles we have overcome and the progress we still need to make. It's a reminder of the importance of celebrating our culture, sharing stories and inspiring future generations.

Q: IN YOUR VIEW, HOW ARE BLACK HISTORY AND LABOR HISTORY CONNECTED?

DM: African Americans' experience in the workforce was marked by discrimination and racism and was shaped by the labor movement. African Americans had to use labor unions that helped them fight for better working conditions and get through their struggles for workers' rights, which involved strikes and walking away from their worksites.



Raya Fagg is the outreach coordinator for the Office of Cultural Affairs for Upper Darby Township in Pennsylvania. A Local 153 (Region II) member since 2019, she also serves as the secretary for her union's executive board.

The best memory I have with OPEIU is when we went to Memphis in 2018 for an educational conference and participated in the "I Am a Man" 50th Anniversary of the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike. This is one of the main events that showed me what a force the labor union is. There were folks of every color and every nationality, all gathered at the same place to commemorate the same thing.

I did not know what "I Am a Man" meant until I attended that educational conference. When I returned to North Carolina I did my research and learned they were garbage men and fought with their white colleagues telling them "I am a man." This event will stick with me for life. It is a core memory, and we were part of history that day. This event was something that opened my eyes as a union representative to see what it truly means to be part of a labor union.

RF: Black history and labor history are connected because you have two overlapping, vulnerable groups. At some point, Black workers,



Denise Moore began working in the dining facility at Andrews Air Force Base in 1983, becoming an Industrial, Technical and Professional Employees Union (ITPEU)/OPEIU Local 4873 (Region III) member. Eventually, she was elected as a shop steward and, in 2008, became a representative with her union. She represents members at Fort Liberty in Spring Lake, North Carolina.

because of slavery, were able to get together and that is where you start seeing the parallels of workers who had no rights and slaves who had no rights. Both, for the same reasons, had to overcome adversity to fight for rights or gain rights that would allow them to be seen and heard — to be given the same opportunities that others had.

Personally, my time with OPEIU has been one where I have grown. I never thought I would be in a position where I could make changes for the betterment of my co-workers. One person can make change, but that change is much stronger if it comes from and benefits the greater group.



Glenda Armstrong is a member of the General Association of Miramar Employees (GAME)/OPEIU Local 101 (Region III), working as a supervisor in the city police department's property and evidence unit. A former president of the local, Armstrong's career has spanned nearly 30 years with the City of Miramar, Florida, and two decades with Local 101.

GA: Black history and labor history go hand in hand. There was racism where black workers weren't treated equally in the workplace. The labor movement provided better working conditions and paved a way to give equal rights to non-white counterparts. It also created solidarity among the workers.

TN: Black history and labor history are deeply connected because the struggles and contributions of Black people have been central in shaping the labor movement and the economy in the U.S. Enslaved labor built much of the nation's wealth, and after emancipation, Black workers

faced exclusion from unions, systemic racism and exploitative practices. Despite these barriers, Black leaders like A. Philip Randolph played key roles in organizing for fair wages, workplace rights and equality, including founding the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters — the first major Black-led union. The fight for racial justice and labor rights has often intersected, driving movements for civil rights and economic equality.

Q: WHAT LESSONS CAN BE LEARNED FROM BLACK HISTORY?

DM: The main lesson is we need to treat each other with compassion and love, the way we want to be treated. We all have rights. No matter our color, we have rights. Black history shows us that we can overcome challenges. Black History Month is just a reminder that we are all human beings — no matter what race we are, we all share the same color of blood.

RF: Systems can be changed. It must start with an individual and end with a collective. If you see a wrong that needs to be right, all it takes is one person to speak up. And one person to talk to and educate others, so they too can see the injustice and fight for what is fair.

GA: The lesson to be seen and to be treated as equal as everyone else. The Civil Rights Movement sparked other movements for someone like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to dream that his children would one day "not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." People still have a lot to learn about Black history and our history still has a lot of stories to be told. We are a lot further than where we were, but there are still other lessons to be learned.

TN: Black history teaches us invaluable lessons about resilience, the pursuit of justice and the power of community. It shows us how systemic oppression can be challenged through courage, activism and unity, as seen in movements like the Civil Rights Movement. It underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing inequality while celebrating the contributions and achievements of those who have been marginalized. Black history also teaches that progress requires persistence and that every individual has the power to inspire change. Most importantly, it reminds us to honor diversity and strive for an equitable future.



Tamua Newton of Local 30 (Region V) has worked at City of Hope, a nonprofit cancer treatment and research center in Duarte, California, for more than 20 years. She serves as a steward and is a member of the local's executive board.

Kapi'olani Nurses Win Historic Contract

After standing strong through two unfair labor practice (ULP) strikes and an employer lockout, Hawai'i Nurses' Association (HNA)/OPEIU Local 50 (Region VIII) nurses won the state's first-ever contractually enforceable safe staffing ratios.

In a huge victory, nurses at Kapi'olani Medical Center for Women and Children in Honolulu overwhelmingly voted to ratify a historic new three-year contract that includes safe staffing ratios — a major priority for more than 600 nurses at the medical center. The contract includes several other improvements, including annual wage increases of three percent (at ratification), and then three, four and four percent each year. Nurses also won double time for extra hours worked prior to a shift and protections against workplace violence and excess cancellations.

Throughout a year of bargaining, three informational pickets, two ULP strikes and a three-week lockout, Kapi'olani nurses remained united in their fight for patient safety and respect at work. In doing so, they won a monumental contract that will help improve the lives of patients and inspire health care workers across the state to fight for and win what they deserve.

"It's been quite the long road. One year, two strikes and being locked out," said Rose Agas-Yuu, RN, president of HNA/OPEIU Local 50 to Island News. "I hope if anything, the state sees that and knows how important this topic is, to make sure we have the right number of nurses at the bedside." Agas-Yuu also serves as a vice president on the OPEIU Executive Board.

The agreement was reached on the 18th day of what would become a 22-day lockout. Nurses returned to work days after voting 598-11 to ratify the agreement.

HNA/OPEIU Local 50-represented nurses at other medical facilities owned by Hawai'i Pacific Health (HPH) are already organizing around the victory. Shortly after the agreement was ratified in Honolulu, nurses at the HPH-owned Wilcox Medical Center in Kaua'i held an informational picket to push for the same staffing ratio protections won by Kapi'olani nurses.

"Hawai'i Pacific Health agreed to a ratio matrix at Kapi'olani Medical Center just last week, but now they refuse to even consider it at the bargaining table with Wilcox nurses," Local 50 said in a statement.

"We know folks in Kaua'i, Maui and Hawai'i counties have less access to health care than on O'ahu," the statement continued. "As a community we must stand up to greedy corporations like HPH and demand they provide the highest level of care for our entire archipelago."



IRC Workers Organize Nationwide

Following their September 2023 NLRB election victory in Dallas with Local 277 (Region IV), staff at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) have expanded their union by organizing more of the nonprofit's 28 U.S. locations.

In Denver with Local 30 (Region V); San Jose, Turlock and Oakland with Local 29 (Region V); Abilene and Dallas with Local 277; Atlanta with Local 179 (Region III); and New York with Local 153 (Region II), IRC employees are building a national movement to improve conditions for IRC workers and clients. The recently launched ircworkersunite.org webpage serves as a central hub and point of contact for non-union IRC workers across the country to get involved.

"We're unionizing because we believe we are stronger as a workplace when we're organized together," said Aaron Banen, a youth program specialist at IRC NY. "We join several other IRC offices that have recently unionized and face similar workplace struggles, such as large caseloads, work-life balance concerns and more. We also believe it is in the best interest of the clients we serve. Unionizing will allow us to provide better quality services to these vulnerable populations, especially considering the current political climate."



IRC Denver employees are now members of Local 30.



IRC San Jose employees have recently organized.

Founded in 1933 to assist refugees fleeing persecution in Nazi Germany, the IRC continues to provide emergency aid and long-term assistance to refugees and those displaced by war, persecution and natural disasters across the globe.

But workers at the international nonprofit are routinely dealt unsustainable workloads, with some staffers responsible for 700 or more clients. Bilingual employees are regularly expected to take on additional work as interpreters, but are not compensated accordingly. Turnover issues stemming from low pay, unmanageable workloads and subpar training compound the issues, depleting the organization of experienced talent and depriving clients the expertise they deserve.

"Being a professional in the field of humanitarian work in our state is becoming increasingly difficult," said Tammy Calder, a refugee medical assistance specialist based in Abilene. "Our clients come here seeking safety and security in a totally new setting. They don't know much about the systems in the United States, and we are on the front lines of supporting them through this vulnerable period."

"As our state leaders do everything in their power to deny refugees and forced migrants the right to make a home in this country that we love, we want to ensure we have the security and stability we need to support those seeking a new life and a new beginning," Calder continued.



Employees of IRC Oakland are on the front line serving their community.



IRC Abilene employees celebrate their union.

SAGE Workers Win Voluntary Recognition, Joining Local 153



Newly organized 153 members from the SAGE Workers Union at the Brooklyn Pride Festival in June. Left to right are Jude Young, Natalie Gonzalez, Arnold Lewis, Shea Sprague, Deidre Hart Smith and Organizing Committee member Sam Sheldon.

Workers at SAGE, the nation’s largest and oldest advocacy and service organization for LGBTQIA+ elders, won voluntary recognition of their union with Local 153 (Region II) in New York City.

Despite an attempt by management to exclude a large swath of staff, their union won a wall-to-wall unit covering 70 staffers. Social workers, program staff, care managers, facilities staff, policy advocates, tenant coordinators, concierges, communication and frontline staff are all now able to bargain over the terms and conditions of their employment.

“I am looking forward to meeting management at the bargaining table to build a world where the workers who support our community are supported themselves,” said Emma Bessire, a campaign manager at SAGE. “We won’t stand for routine medical expenses being denied by our insurance, for the pay inequity between frontline staff and management and decisions that affect our participants and our lives being made without us.

“As a member of the advocacy team, I have been organizing for a better world since I was a teenager,” Bessire continued. “But today, I am, perhaps, most proud of the accomplishment of winning our union and preparing to bargain for a contract for all.”

By unionizing, workers at SAGE — who are overwhelmingly members of the LGBTQIA+ community themselves — can have a say over workplace policies impacting their clients.

“The LGBTQIA+ community faces increasing political threats, emphasizing the need for collective action and solidarity to protect our community, our vital work and our daily existence,” the union noted in its letter requesting voluntary recognition from management.

Bargaining has begun and SAGE workers are addressing their main issues: pay transparency and equity, higher wages, affordable health insurance inclusive of gender-affirming care, pathways for professional development and a voice when it comes to organizational decision-making.

“I am proud to be part of a long history of queer organizers and union activists,” said Liz Kinports, a care manager at SAGE. “Queer solidarity and worker solidarity are inseparable. Many of our SAGE participants themselves have been union workers and organizers and there is a rich history of LGBTQIA+ action for labor rights.”

Speech and Language Development Center Staff Join Local 30

More than 160 paraprofessionals at the Speech and Language Development Center (SLDC), a non-public school and therapy center in Buena Park, California, voted overwhelmingly to form a union with Local 30 (Region V) in San Diego.

The school is one of the first non-public schools in the country to offer a dedicated one-to-one learning environment for children with severe disabilities. The paraprofessionals, also known as teachers’ aides, organized to address workplace safety, understaffing and pay equity, while centering their campaign around the needs of the students.

The staff at the nonprofit stood together in the face of an anti-union campaign waged by the employer’s union busters and won a landslide victory, according to Local 30 Organizing Director Jamie Campbell and OPEIU Lead Organizer Sam Tiratto.



Members of the organizing committee after the landslide victory was announced.

Disability Rights Washington Wins Recognition with 100 Percent Support, Joining Local 8

Staff at the nonprofit Disability Rights Washington (DRW) won recognition of their union with Local 8 (Region VI). One hundred percent of the bargaining unit, comprised of 24 staff attorneys, investigators, ombudspersons, advocates and educators, signed union cards.

“Our commitment to the disability justice movement requires us to take an active and collaborative role in stewarding not only our organization’s work, but also our own workplace’s culture and practices toward ever greater alignment with disability justice values,” said Danny Waxwing, an attorney at DRW. “Unionizing is one piece of how we can engage with this responsibility. Doing so will allow us to better serve the clients and communities we care so deeply about.”

The union drive began in late March when a beloved colleague was wrongly terminated, according to Local 8 Organizer Omar Cuevas Vega.

Reaching full support “was something I talked to the group about from the beginning,” Cuevas Vega said, given its relatively small size. After a few weeks of one-on-one conversations between co-workers, he said “we quickly built up to 82 percent. In the final days before asking for voluntary recognition, we received 100 percent support.”

In addition to protections against wrongful termination, workers at DRW are seeking higher wages, better benefits and changes that would allow workers to better serve the disability community. Bargaining is underway.

Staff at a related organization, Disability Rights Ohio, formed a union with Local 792 (Region VII) in August 2022 and ratified their first union contract in November.

Disability Rights Ohio Staff Ratify First Union Contract

Nonprofit staff at Disability Rights Ohio (DRO) voted overwhelmingly to ratify their first union contract in November. Their union, DRO United, is part of Local 792 (Region VII).

Staff began organizing in 2022 to address low wages and high turnover at the organization, which provides legal services and support to the state’s disability community. Organizing culminated in a Nov. 11 ratification vote, with 96 percent voting in favor of the contract.

The three-year contract addresses major bargaining priorities for the group’s attorneys, paralegals, advocates, assistants, and communication and outreach staff, including wage increases between 17 and 21 percent over the course of the contract. Other highlights include 12 weeks of paid parental leave, a clearer path toward promotion into senior titles, grievance procedures and various new committees to give staff a bigger say over the organization’s direction.

“For the next three years, we can focus more on our clients, knowing our efforts will be rewarded to cover the cost of living as inflation rises,” said Scott Winzig, a paralegal at DRO since 2016 who served on both the organizing and bargaining committees. “Our mission is great, but we know that good feelings alone don’t pay the bills.”

The added job security from the new contract, Winzig said, will allow DRO staff to better support and advocate for their clients across the state.



The Local 792 DRO United bargaining committee, left to right, are Lindsey Evans, Scott Winzig, Julie Keys, Ellis Cliff and Melissa Day, seated. Not pictured are Jessica Weiner and Lauren Kraft.

Wesleyan Grad Students Win Their Union with Local 153



Graduate workers at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, during the official vote tally.

Graduate workers at Wesleyan University voted 86-7 to form a union with Local 153 (Region II). Their new union, the Wesleyan Graduate Labor Union (WesGLU), includes 114 graduate employees who teach and conduct research at the Connecticut university.

Working conditions, increased stipends, expanded health care access, support for parents and addressing pay equity issues are priorities their union expects to address at the bargaining table.

“The catharsis of winning our union is indescribable,” said Katie Sagarin, a PhD candidate in biology and one of the campaign’s lead organizers. “I’m overjoyed that I got to help make Wesleyan a better, safer place to learn and work.”

“Winning the union is a crucial step toward equality on campus,” agreed Shawn O’Sullivan, a masters student studying music. “We look forward to working with all members to develop proposals that reflect the needs of all Wesleyan grad workers.”

Local 153 represents several groups of workers at the university, including undergraduate resident advisors, clerical and administrative assistants, and Physical Plant employees.

First Contract Reached at Freedom House: ‘All of Us Are Stronger Together’

Staff at Freedom House, a nonprofit research institute and pro-democracy think tank, ratified their first union contract with Local 153 (Region II) in New York City.

The three-year agreement covers 81 U.S.-based staff members across the organization, including those focused on policy, communication, operations, strategy, research and/or digital media.

The agreement includes a one-time across-the-board salary increase, doubles

the time allotted for parental and caregiver leave, reduces health care premiums, and introduces discretionary leave days that can be requested after periods of intense or prolonged work.

“I really love working at Freedom House, and we wanted to make sure we had the best protections possible,” said Alaina Rudnick, a program officer at the organization for almost five years. “We wanted the same labor and

human rights we support for all of our partners.”

The contract “shows that all of us are stronger together and really cements a lot of things Freedom House stands for as a human rights organization,” said Rudnick, who served on the union’s organizing and bargaining committees. “Solidarity is essential to our work and we do our best work when we, ourselves, are supported.”

Record Increases for Local 277 Members at AIL



American Income Life employees represented by Local 277 at the company’s Waco headquarters.

Employees in the Local 277 (Region IV) bargaining unit at the American Income Life (AIL) Insurance Company’s Waco headquarters gained record wage and benefit increases in recent contract negotiations. Over the life of the three-year agreement, employees will receive \$7,800 in wage increases, according to Tyler Turner, an OPEIU vice president and president of Local 277 in Fort Worth, Texas. There also will be no increase to the employee’s current cost sharing of their health insurance, ensuring the gained wage increase is not diluted by higher insurance costs.

Among the contract improvements are an 8.5 percent increase to the defined benefit pension plan, a \$5,000 increase to the already established \$15,000 company-funded educational scholarship available each year to employees and their children, increases in bereavement and personal leave, and an increase to the group life insurance benefit. A new benefit was also negotiated covering employees’ lost time and pay due to inclement weather, whether they work at the Waco offices or remotely. The membership overwhelmingly ratified the contract.

The Local 277 bargaining team led by Turner included Linda Gonzalez, secretary-treasurer; Crystal Gentry, recording secretary; DeAundra Cephus, vice president; Debbie Engelke, LaShun Hawkins, Dave Jones and Brandon Ramos, members; and Tonia Stonum, trustee.

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Steward Spotlight

Building Union Power in the Public Sector



By Kim King
Case Aide/Waiver Specialist
Area Agency on Aging and
Disabilities of Southwest Washington
Local 11 (Region VI), Washington

“I began to gain a better understanding of the entire workplace by listening intently and often, which is one of the most important skills an effective steward needs to have.”

Stewards are among the most knowledgeable people in any union workplace when it comes to contracts. In my 29 years of experience as a steward with Local 11 (Region VI) across two different employers, I have learned being proactive with that knowledge can help build union power every single day.

Since 2015, I have worked in the public sector, as a case aide/waiver specialist for the Area Agency on Aging and Disabilities of Southwest Washington, helping seniors stay in their own homes as they age. After serving for 20 years as a steward at my previous job at the nonprofit Columbia River Mental Health — also a Local 11 shop — I was elected steward by my new colleagues at my first meeting.

Slowly but surely, I began building trust and relationships with my co-workers. Over time, as they got to know me better, they felt more comfortable bringing issues to me. I began to gain a better understanding of the entire workplace by listening intently and often, which is one of the most important skills an effective steward needs to have.

This has helped create a culture where we openly discuss workplace issues, our contract and our rights at work. During our new member orientation, we emphasize how our union contract offers protections, benefits and a way to have a real say over working conditions. Despite the fact the public sector is **right to work**, our union has a very low opt-out rate. From orientation to contract administration to bargaining, everything is guided by the principles of organizing.

Stewards know better than anybody how the specific language of a contract can have far-reaching impacts. That is why it is critical, in my view, for stewards to also take an active role in collective bargaining. As administrators of the contract, we can use our expertise and experience to proactively address issues at the bargaining table by advocating for clearer language as the contract is written.

At my first union meeting, only five people attended. Now, we regularly host two meetings to accommodate all 60 members who want to attend. It did not happen by accident, and it did not happen overnight. The seeds we plant in every conversation, no matter how small, can grow into a future with better wages, benefits and working conditions for our members.

So, what exactly are right-to-work laws? Right to work is a very misleading name for a policy designed to actually take away rights from working people. Backers of right-to-work laws claim these laws protect workers against being forced to join a union. The reality is federal law already makes it illegal to force someone to join a union.

The real purpose is to tilt the balance toward big corporations and further rig the system at the expense of working families. These laws make it harder for working people to form unions and collectively bargain for better wages, benefits and working conditions.

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Since 1945 OPEIU has stood at the forefront of the movement to organize professional workers, helping them attain the wages, benefits and workplace conditions all working people need and deserve.

As we celebrate 80 incredible years since receiving our charter from the American Federation of Labor, we recognize all OPEIU nurses, teachers, clerks, pilots, engineers, accountants, librarians, podiatrists, lawyers, bank tellers, and tech, museum, nonprofit and university employees, government and manufacturing workers and the many others who are standing shoulder to shoulder to fight for dignity and respect in the workplace.

OPEIU is 80 years strong and on the move!