



February 6th, 2025

To: Senate Committee on Labor and Business

Re: Strong Support of SB 916

Chair Taylor, Vice-Chair Bonham, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Joshua Estes and I am honored to testify today on behalf of the Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers Union (AWPPW) in **strong support of SB 916**. Our union represents thousands of hardworking men and women in Oregon's pulp, paper, and forest products industry—an industry that has long been the backbone of our state's economy, providing stable, family-wage jobs that support not just individual workers, but entire communities. These are the workers who show up at all hours of the day and night, in rain, snow, and heat, to keep our mills running. They are the ones who work in conditions that most people will never experience—mills where the heat and humidity can be unbearable, where the machinery never stops, and where the work is physically demanding and often dangerous. They are the ones who go home exhausted, their bodies worn from years of labor, but who take pride in the work they do because they know how essential their jobs are to Oregon's economy.

Yet despite their sacrifices, despite the essential role they play in keeping this industry alive, these workers are too often treated as disposable when it comes to contract negotiations. Year after year, as operating costs rise and corporate executives look for ways to maintain their profit margins, it is the workers who are asked to bear the burden. We have seen time and time again how rising costs are used as justification to push for lower wages, to reduce healthcare benefits, to weaken pension plans, and to cut corners on workplace safety. Our members are constantly being asked to do more with less, to take on heavier workloads, to accept contracts that diminish the quality of life for them and their families. And when workers dare to stand up and say enough is enough, when they demand fair treatment at the bargaining table, they are often met with bad-faith negotiations, stonewalling, and ultimatums that force them into an impossible choice—accept a contract that doesn't meet their needs, or go on strike to fight for something better.

Striking is never the first choice. It is not something that workers take lightly. In reality, it is the last, most desperate tool that workers have when their employer refuses to engage in good-faith bargaining. When workers strike, it is because they have exhausted every other option. But the current system makes that choice even harder by punishing workers who stand up for their rights. Under current Oregon law, workers who go on strike are ineligible for unemployment benefits, even though they are still willing and able to work. They are not voluntarily leaving their jobs. They are not seeking a free handout. They are taking a stand against unfair labor practices, against subpar wages, against dangerous working conditions. And yet, under current law, they are treated as if they have simply walked away from their livelihoods.

The financial burden of a strike is immense. For workers, it means weeks, sometimes months, without a paycheck. It means being unable to pay rent or mortgage payments, being unable to afford groceries, being forced to make impossible decisions between keeping the lights on and

buying medicine for their children. Striking workers often lose their health insurance, leaving them vulnerable to medical emergencies that could send them into lifelong debt. Many are forced to find second jobs just to survive—taking exhausting night shifts in warehouses or driving for rideshare companies after spending all day on a picket line. Some families are forced to pull their children out of childcare, and others must rely on food banks just to put dinner on the table. These are not abstract hardships. These are the real, lived experiences of striking workers in Oregon.

Imagine being a father of three, standing on a picket line in the pouring rain, knowing that while you fight for better wages and safer conditions, your family is at home struggling to make ends meet. Imagine being a single mother who has worked in the same mill for fifteen years, forced to max out credit cards and dip into savings just to keep food on the table because your employer refuses to negotiate a fair contract. Imagine telling your teenage daughter that she can't participate in her school sports program this year because you had to make a choice between standing up for your rights or settling for a contract that would leave you worse off in the long run. No one should have to make those choices, but that is the reality for striking workers in this state.

While corporations can weather a prolonged labor dispute with their deep pockets and legal teams, workers cannot. Employers have the resources to wait it out. They know that time is on their side, that the longer a strike lasts, the more desperate workers will become. They use the threat of starvation and homelessness as a bargaining tool, counting on the fact that workers will eventually be forced to accept a contract out of sheer financial necessity rather than because it is a fair and just agreement. This is not collective bargaining. This is not fair negotiation. This is a system that is rigged against workers, and it needs to change.

SB 916 is a simple, reasonable, and long-overdue solution to this injustice. It does not create a special privilege for striking workers—it merely ensures that they have the same access to unemployment benefits as any other worker who finds themselves without income through no fault of their own. It ensures that workers are not forced into abject poverty simply because they exercised their legal right to withhold their labor in the face of unfair treatment. It gives workers a fighting chance to hold the line and bargain for contracts that allow them to provide for their families. It ensures that labor disputes are decided on the merits of the negotiations, not on who can financially outlast the other.

Opponents of this bill will argue that it is too costly, that it will place an undue burden on the unemployment system. But let's look at the facts. The vast majority of strikes—86%—end within just two weeks (*U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023*). The cost of providing unemployment benefits to striking workers has been estimated at just 0.24% of total UI expenditures (*Economic Policy Institute, 2023*). This is not a budget-breaking expense. It is a small but meaningful investment in fairness, in worker rights, and in Oregon's economic stability. If other states like New York and New Jersey have recognized the fundamental justice of allowing striking workers to access unemployment benefits, then Oregon can and should do the same (*National Employment Law Project, 2023*).

Oregon has long been a leader in standing up for workers' rights. We have prided ourselves on protecting working families and ensuring that our economy works for everyone—not just for corporations and executives, but for the people who keep this state running. Passing SB 916 is an opportunity to reaffirm that commitment. It is an opportunity to say, clearly and unequivocally, that

Oregon stands with workers, that we believe in the right to fair wages, safe workplaces, and the ability to bargain without fear of financial ruin.

On behalf of the thousands of AWPPW members and their families who have sacrificed so much for their jobs and their communities, **I urge you to vote yes on SB 916**. Oregon's workers deserve better. They deserve dignity, they deserve fairness, and they deserve the security of knowing that when they stand up for their rights, they will not be left to suffer. Thank you for your time, and I welcome any questions.

Respectfully,



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