

Date: February 6th, 2025

To: Senate Committee on Labor & Business

From: Felicity Ratway, AFT-Oregon

Re: Support for “Relating to unemployment insurance benefits for employees unemployed due to a labor dispute; declaring an emergency- [SB-916](#)”

Chair Taylor, Vice Chair Bonham and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on SB 916.

AFT-Oregon represents over 18,000 education workers across Oregon. On behalf of our members, we strongly encourage your support of SB 916 which would repeal the law blocking unemployment benefits to workers on strike. This bill would help ensure that workers are able to stay afloat while fighting for a fair contract.

Our members rarely strike. Stepping away from the job is something we never hope to do given both the critical importance of our education work and the risks for workers presented by striking. Because of the gravity of such a decision, workers vote to ensure that there is a consensus to move forward with a strike due to the immense sacrifices involved. When breakdowns in negotiations lead to such a drastic decision, it is crucial that workers exercising their right to strike have a safety net to keep them afloat until a fair contract is reached.

Last year, one of our locals, the Coalition of Graduate Employees (Local 6069), went on its first strike since its formation in 1999. The decision to strike came after contract negotiations dragged on for over a year. Management attempted to upset decades of precedent and triple the length of time between negotiations, took months to respond with counter-offers on substantive proposals like salary, and walked away from the table when they did attend scheduled bargaining sessions—spending as little as 35 minutes of a 5 hour session negotiating with workers. Ultimately, vulnerable, low-paid graduate employees were put in the difficult position of having to decide whether to accept a contract that did not include being made whole following the strike. Workers accepted the contract, with the looming risk of not only lost wages but also potentially the loss of benefits like tuition waivers and health insurance.

We know that there is a power imbalance in this country between employers and workers - a gap that has only grown wider. Companies are making record profits while wages stay stagnant or unable to keep up with inflation. This imbalance persists during strikes, where employees bear the brunt of the risk. While employers are paid throughout bargaining and can often “starve out” employees, workers are 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. Employers having a real stake in negotiations going smoothly and efficiently could decrease the amount of strikes and the duration of strikes.

Unemployment insurance was designed to protect workers and families due to an unexpected loss of wages, which is precisely what striking workers experience. Like other workers served by the UI system, striking workers suddenly find themselves without a paycheck when unanticipated breakdowns in contract negotiations lead to a strike. Striking workers may expect to return to work for the same employer, as do many other categories of workers who are currently eligible for UI benefits in most states, such as seasonal workers, workers on temporary layoff, and workers in Short Time Compensation programs.

Furthermore, the UI system was also intended to prevent jobless workers from having to accept employment that is unsafe, unsuitable, or a poor match for their skills and abilities, which would drive down wages and depress labor standards for workers across the board. Workers use the right to strike to challenge unsafe, exploitative, or otherwise unsuitable workplace conditions, low wages, and other harmful employment practices—the same types of substandard work the system was designed to safeguard against.

Establishing UI for striking workers will increase stability across sectors due to impacts on retention, worker satisfaction, and workplace standards. Additionally, it will help workers and their families continue to afford necessities and spend money in their communities, sustaining support for the local economy and small businesses. Recent studies suggest that every \$1 spent in UI benefits puts \$2 back into the economy.

Workers, including those we represent in the education sector as well as their counterparts in other vital roles throughout our community, deserve the social safety net benefits afforded by unemployment insurance both to keep their families afloat and to support the local economy in the rare and drastic instant of a strike. We therefore urge your support on SB 916.

Signed,

Felicity Ratway

AFT-Oregon Vice President-At-Large

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