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King County Council joins workers in pressing UW to suspend plans to close laundry

Closure of Rainier Valley facility would impact people of color and immigrants

The King County Council and County Executive Dow Constantine have used the county's leverage as owners of the UW-run Harborview Medical Center to join affected workers to urge the university to suspend plans to close the laundry that serves the UW Medicine network.

That strategy went public Monday (Feb. 26) during a packed public hearing in the council chambers in Seattle.

Some 50 University of Washington Laundry members – many people of color and immigrants who have embraced the American Dream -- pleaded with the King County Council to join their fight to keep their facility open.

“Please help us – our dream is gone,” **Sewalem Gebre**, a laundry operator 1 told the council. Gebre is a member of Local 3488 of the Washington Federation of State Employees/AFSCME Council 28.

The UW claims a \$75 million budget shortfall may mean a closure and outsourcing of the facility in Seattle's Rainier Valley.

But a grass-roots petition flying out of the hands of laundry supporters urges the UW to meet with the laundry workers to brainstorm solutions.

The closure proposal is “targeting lower-wage workers from communities who have little or no voice in the university's decision-making,” the petition said.

The laundry and its 120 workers are too valuable to lose, members told the council Monday. Laundry members from SEIU Local 925 were also there.

“We didn't do anything wrong – and we're losing our jobs,” said Local 3488 member **Mustafa Getahun**.

The Local 3488 members said if the laundry closes and they lose their jobs, their families would suffer when it comes time to pay the mortgage and doctors' bills.

(MORE)

WFSE UW LAUNDRY

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“I just pray, I hope you guys help us out to keep this laundry open,” said Local 3488 member **Patricia Thomas**, a laundry operator 1 for 27 years.

The county officials have already gone on the record in support of the laundry and its acclaimed workers.

Seven of the council’s nine members and County Executive Dow Constantine on Feb. 12 formally asked UW President Ana Mari Cauce to freeze the contracting timeline and discuss options to save the laundry and jobs. One of those might be new funding tied to the county’s upcoming capital levy for Harborview Medical Center.

“King County is interested in discussing the possibility of including new capital funding for an upgraded laundry facility on Harborview Medical Center’s campus, as part of Harborview’s upcoming capital levy,” the executive and councilmembers wrote Cauce.

The letter was signed by Constantine and councilmembers Joe McDermott (chair), Rod Dembowski (vice chair), Claudia Balducci, Reagan Dunn, Larry Gossett, Jeanne Kohl-Welles and Dave Upthegrove.

The county had asked for a meeting before March 1.

Cauce responded Feb. 16 that her staff would reach out to the council “as soon as possible” to schedule a “substantive discussion of your ideas.”

With that, the laundry workers at Monday’s hearing urged the council to continue holding the UW’s feet to the fire on behalf of the laundry, the workers, their families and the community.

King County has unique leverage because it owns Harborview Medical Center. The UW runs it on a management contract, but the council expects the UW to follow the county’s values in how it treats workers and patients. The county-owned facility is a major user of the laundry, thus the council’s keen interest and responsibility in protecting jobs, safety and health related to the proposed closure of the laundry.

“They (the laundry workers) are really providing an important public service in cleaning all of UW Medicine’s laundry,” said Rod Palmquist, WFSE/AFSCME’s Higher Education strategic coordinator. “We really hope that we can work with you to find an alternative solution to this problem.”

This is not the first time that the UW has tried to close facilities that harm the surrounding communities and workers, both of whom are largely people of color and immigrants.

In 2014, union members and the community rose up to stop the UW’s proposed closure of four critical care clinics at Harborview Medical Center (Women’s, Pediatric, Family and Adult Care) and move them away from the county citizens who depend on them.

Note: Video of the Feb. 26 public hearing will be available at http://king.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=4&clip_id=6917

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