

# WEEK IN ACTION!

Weekly News From Your Union ~ October 20, 2014 – October 24, 2014

## **VSEA Announces Endorsements!**

VSEA's political action arm, VtPAC, announced your union's 2014 candidate endorsements this week in Senate, House and State's Attorney's races across Vermont. VSEA members are urged to review the list to learn which candidates earned your union's support on November 4.

You can see your union's 2014 candidate endorsements [here](#).

## **Eighteen Percent Premium Spike Announcement Raises Numerous Questions**

VSEA leaders and headquarters staff have been responding this week to a host of member questions, prompted by the State's announcement that state employee health care premiums would rise by 17.9%. Here are some of the more commonly asked questions:

BC/BS = Blue Cross/Blue Shield

### **Q: Why is BC/BS raising my rates?**

BC/BS has no say in setting our premium rates. The state of Vermont's health plan is self-insured. The State contracts with an insurance company, currently BC/BS, to adjudicate insurance claims, but the plan benefits are the result of collective bargaining between the State and VSEA. As far as premiums, the State contracts with an independent actuarial firm to monitor the plan and propose sufficient premium increases to adequately cover projected health insurance claims for the following year. Your contracts stipulate that state employees are responsible for 20% of premiums, and the State picks of the tab for the remaining 80%.

### **Q: Why are State health insurance premiums so high compared to other plans?**

Premiums are basically a reflection of the benefit levels in a health plan. Many other health plans have a high deductible or lesser benefits than ours, and therefore, lower premiums. Our premiums are not out of line with many BC/BS plans that have the higher benefit levels. State employees pay higher premiums to have plans with little to no deductibles and copays. Many Vermonters working in the private sector pay lower premiums for their health plans, but their plans also include unaffordable deductibles up to \$5000 and high out-of-pocket costs for medical claims.

### **Q: What caused the 17.9% premium increase?**

The plan experienced a significant increase in the number of high-cost medical claims during the last few months of 2013 under Cigna, and the spike continued into 2014. This adverse medical claims experience—which coincided with four premium holidays in FY2013—resulted in the plan's reserves being completely exhausted. Average monthly medical claims have been higher during 2014; however the higher trend only accounts for roughly 10% of the premium increase. The remaining 8% will go toward paying off the plan's \$3 million deficit and rebuilding the plan's \$10 million reserve over three years.

### **Q: Were state employees offered any alternative to the 17.9% Premium Increase?"**

Yes. Prior to the announcement, VSEA leaders and State officials reviewed three options for health insurance increases to meet the plan's increased expenses and pay off the deficit. The options ranged from 17.9% to 22.6%. VSEA leaders recognized that the lowest option (17.9%) was unaffordable for many members. The only difference between the three options was the

speed at which the plan's \$10 million reserve would be replenished. VSEA advocated for the lowest increase available to meet plan expenses and refill its reserve over three years. In addition, if the high claims trend levels off, the plan reserves will be refilled faster.

**Q: Was there a way to lessen the blow, meaning not receive such a big hit all at once?**

Yes. VSEA leaders on the Benefits Advisory Committee have long advocated against fiscally irresponsible premium holidays. Although some state employees appreciate a break from paying their insurance premiums, premium holidays are simply an unsound way to manage the plan. The State gets 80% of the savings from premium holidays, which they then use to balance the budget. If the State had authorized only two premium holidays in 2013, instead of four, the premium increase for 2015 would have been roughly 10%, instead of 17.9%.

**Q: What can state employees do to reduce the impact of the premium hike?**

- Roughly 1,000 State employees currently pay their health insurance premiums with after-tax dollars. To pay your insurance premiums on a pre-tax basis, state employees can fill out and submit this form:

[http://humanresources.vermont.gov/sites/dhr/files/Documents/Benefits/DHR-Health\\_Benefits\\_Pretax\\_Form\\_2013.pdf](http://humanresources.vermont.gov/sites/dhr/files/Documents/Benefits/DHR-Health_Benefits_Pretax_Form_2013.pdf)

- Currently, only 20% of state employees are taking advantage of Flex-Spending Accounts, which allow an employee to pay healthcare, vision and dental deductibles and copays with pre-tax income. State employees who anticipate regular copays or other medical expenses should utilize flex spending accounts to pay these out-of-pocket costs on a pre-tax basis. Start a Flex Spending Account using this form:

[http://humanresources.vermont.gov/sites/dhr/files/Documents/Benefits/DHR-FSA\\_Enrollmet\\_Form\\_2014.pdf](http://humanresources.vermont.gov/sites/dhr/files/Documents/Benefits/DHR-FSA_Enrollmet_Form_2014.pdf)

**Q: How can we prevent this from happening again?**

- Give state employees statutory veto power over fiscally irresponsible premium holidays;
- Open state employee health clinics, like those in Alabama, Colorado, Montana, and Tennessee, which have saved taxpayers and state employees millions of dollars by increasing access to preventive medicine;
- Explore income-based premium sharing, like UVM and the Vermont State Colleges. Why should a state employee earning \$30,000 be expected to pay the same 20% premium as a commissioner earning over \$100,000?; and
- Real health care reform that includes cost-containing measures. The state employee health plan is susceptible to the same cost-shifting pressure as private insurance due to low Medicaid reimbursement rates and other market forces.

**[VSEA Benefits Advisory Committee Chairperson Pens Letter To Members](#)**

On the heels of the State's announcement early this week that state employees' health care premiums would be rising nearly 18%, VSEA Benefits Advisory Committee Chair Dave Bellini penned a letter to members, laying out a timeline and explaining some of the decisions that led to the announcement and the missed opportunities he feels could have helped lessen the blow to workers' wallets.

To read Bellini's letter, please [click here](#).

## **VSEA Members Urged To Continue Solidarity Efforts With Striking Fairpoint Workers**

VSEA is thanking all the members have been showing up at Fairpoint workers' picket lines across Vermont to march alongside the striking workers and join their public call for fairness. Pictured here are members of VSEA's Brattleboro Chapter joining their local Fairpoint picket line this week, and a photo of striking Fairpoint workers, helping to stay warm with VSEA-donated gloves!

Fairpoint workers are asking VSEA members to please contact the State's top official at 828-3333 and urge him to help get Fairpoint bosses back to the bargaining table. You can find out picket locations [here](#).

## **Barre Chapter Members Reminded About Oct. 30 Candidate Forum!**

With an eye towards the upcoming 2014-2015 legislative session, VSEA's Barre Chapter is hosting a forum on October 30 and inviting Chapter members to share their thoughts and concerns about the budget, position and service cuts and other workplace issues with local lawmakers and candidates for office. This is a great opportunity for Barre Chapter members to talk one-on-one with the decision-makers in Montpelier.

### **Barre Chapter Candidate/Lawmaker Forum**

Thursday, October 30

5:00 p.m.

The Quarry Restaurant

210 N. Main St.

Barre

## **VSEA Announces New Union Representative Territories**

### ***Josh Massey Returning To Work Soon As New Union Representative***

VSEA Director of Field Services Gretchen Naylor is announcing a reshuffling of territories and agency/department assignments for VSEA Union Representatives. Please consult the list below to learn who your Union Representative is. Josh Massey, who was a VSEA Organizer before leaving this summer to work for a political party, will return to VSEA shortly after Election Day in a new role as Union Representative.

Please consult the list below to learn who your Union Representative is.

**John Brabant:** St. Albans, Grand Isle, St. Johnsbury, White River Junction, Vermont Psychiatric Care Hospital (VPCH), Middlesex Residential Facility, Lyndon State College, Vermont Technical College

**Kelly Burns :** Chittenden, Lamoille, Johnson State College

**Dave Van Deusen:** Statewide Agency of Transportation (AOT), Addison, Rutland, Castleton State College

**Bob South:** Brattleboro, Springfield, Newport, Island Pond

**Brian Morse:** Bennington, all supervisors, all of Judiciary

**Josh Massey:** Barre, Waterbury, Central Vermont (except AOT)

## **Hundreds Of AOT Maintenance Workers Receive Raises**

Most Agency of Transportation (AOT) maintenance workers like what they do and care about the service they provide, but they also know how difficult it has become to recruit and retain new

AOT maintenance workers, primarily they say because of the pay being offered. Recognizing the problem, VSEA members who sit on the labor side of an established AOT labor/management committee have been bringing their ideas to improve pay and morale to the table for years, and thanks to the team's persistence—and management solidarity and assistance—hundreds of AOT maintenance workers received a raise on October 1, 2014.

In a letter announcing the raises (which are in addition to recent contract-mandated raises and several other AOT-specific contract wins) to AOT maintenance workers, Senior Manager Scott Rogers wrote: “The issue of transportation maintenance workers’ salaries is one that we’ve heard many times... We’ve heard you loud and clear, and this has been one of the highest priority issues for our management team to tackle over the past 5 years.” He ends: “This email is to let you know that after many years of hard work, we have succeeded in getting the entire TMW series reclassified in such a way that every TMW in the state is getting a raise.”

“This was pretty incredible because it happened outside of the contract bargaining process and it’s the result of a highly collaborative effort between workers and the boss,” said VSEA Senior Union Representative Dave Van Deusen. “I had the privilege to watch the two sides work together to achieve a common goal, and I come away an even stronger believer in the labor/management process. These workers deserve more pay and it’s great that management acknowledged there was a problem and teamed with workers to solve it.”

### **VSEA Members Invited To Alliance For Retired Americans 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference**

The Vermont Chapter of the Alliance for Retired Americans (ARA) is holding its annual conference on Saturday, October 25, and VSEA retirees and members are invited to attend.

Titled “Addressing Senior Issues During A Time Of Political Turmoil,” the ARA conference will feature several informative speakers throughout the day, including ARA’s National Political/Legislative Director Eva Dominguez, who will talk about how Washington D.C. is responding to senior issues, and Champlain Valley Agency on Aging Director John Michael Hall, who will talk about the issues impacting seniors right here in Vermont.

The meeting begins at 10:00 a.m. and ends at 2:00 p.m. It’s being held at the Aldrich Public Library at 6 Washington Street in Barre. Registration begins at 9:00 a.m., and there is a \$15 registration fee for non-ARA members.

For more information, please contact ARA President Jane Osgatharp by phone at (802) 229-0850 or by email at [annajaneo@aol.com](mailto:annajaneo@aol.com).

### **VSEA AHS Members Urged To Participate In Upcoming Budget Forum**

Will the State's proposed FY2016 budget adversely impact the AHS service you provide? Here's your chance to publicly weigh in with the Administration.

The non-profit group Public Assets is sponsoring a special upcoming forum to discuss what budget cuts would mean to AHS services and the workers who provide them on a daily basis. The meeting is being conducted via Vermont Interactive Television, so VSEA members working across the state in DCF, ESD, HAEU, Corrections, Parole and Probation and other AHS services are urged to participate in a studio near you and make your voice heard.

Public Assets' Forum – AHS & The Budget  
Tuesday, October 28  
6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.  
VIT Studios

[Click here](#) to read a Public Assets' post about the meeting.

[Click here](#) to read the State's information about meeting.

## **October 31 Deadline For VSEA Members To Order Discounted Bolton Valley Season Passes**

For the second year in a row, the VSEA Advantage Discount Program is pleased to offer discounted season passes to the Bolton Valley Ski Resort in Bolton, Vt.

VSEA members who order a pass before October 31, 2014, will receive a \$70 discount off the regular \$569 season pass price, making it just \$499. Like last year, this offer is available only to VSEA members who are currently paying full dues to their union.

The sign-up process is pretty straightforward, but, like last year, in order for a member to view the special VSEA discount promo code ([which can be found by clicking here](#)), you must be a registered user of the VSEA website, which also requires you to be a full dues-paying member.

After acquiring the special VSEA promo code, VSEA members can [go here](#) to place your season pass order.

### **Follow these instructions to make your purchase:**

- Click on “Buy Online” and select pass products, accepting or declining pass protection and adding each product to your cart.
- In the Cart view, click on “Add/Change Guest” to set the pass holder's name and information to each pass product, then click “Proceed to Checkout.”
- Enter your Promo Code in the box where it asks for your promo code then click “Apply Code.” The cart should be refreshed and show the discounted corporate pricing.

### **A 2014-15 Bolton Valley All Access Season Pass includes<sup>1</sup>:**

- Unlimited alpine skiing and riding
- 100km of Nordic and backcountry skiing
- A 20% discount on rentals, retail shop purchases, group ski and ride lessons, and lodging (includes condos, suites, or hotel rooms)
- Sports Center Membership including access to an indoor heated pool, hot tub, and sauna

BV pricing allows you to build your own family pass. Adult passes are just \$499 and passes for youth 17 and under are just \$159 when purchased with a parent's pass.

If you have any questions, please contact Brad Battin at 802-434-6813 or [bbattin@boltonvalley.com](mailto:bbattin@boltonvalley.com)

## **Calling All Troublemakers! Vermont Troublemakers' School 2014**

The Vermont Labor Solidarity Committee and Labor Notes are pleased to announce that the 2014 Vermont Troublemakers School is being held Sunday, November 9, from 10:00 a.m to 5:00 p.m. in UVM's Rowen Hall at 106 Carrigan Drive, Burlington.

New strategies centered on social justice unionism have animated recent struggles—from the [2012 Chicago Teachers strike](#) to the recent Teamster [Chittenden County Transit Authority walkout](#) in Vermont.

**Join fellow troublemakers for a day of discussion, training, networking, and inspiration! We'll discuss rank-and-file strategies for advancing our unions and demanding our rights.**

Topics include:

- How to have an organizing conversation
- How to broaden member participation
- Reviving social justice unionism
- Developing rank-and-file leaders
- Winning contract campaigns
- Strikes and other worksite actions to win
- And much more

Here's a list of organizations whose members are contributing to shaping and building our Troublemakers School:

- VSEA
- CCTA Teamster Bus Drivers
- Vermont Workers Center
- United Academics at UVM
- Vermont Nurses and Healthcare Professionals (VNHP)
- VT-NEA teachers
- International Socialist Organization
- UE Locals in Chittenden and Washington Counties
- Vermont Migrant Justice
- Home Health Care Workers
- Howard Center AFSCME Local 1674
- Green Mountain Labor Council
- And more to come.

**To register, choose a registration level at bottom of page, add to your cart and check out through our online store.** (Look for "Shopping Cart" in the upper right corner of the page when you are ready to pay.) For more information or to get involved, contact Traven Leyshon at [Traven.L@gmail.com](mailto:Traven.L@gmail.com) or 802-522-3484.

**Childcare will be available.** Details to come.

## **Brattleboro Chapter Offering To Pay For Members To Attend Troublemakers' School!**

Brattleboro Chapter President Robin Rieske is offering to finance Chapter members who want to attend this year's Troublemaker's School in Burlington. The Chapter will pay your enrollment fee, as well as travel reimbursement for a carpool. If you're interested, please contact Robin at [rieske@sover.net](mailto:rieske@sover.net) by **Friday, October 31, 2014**.

**{PUT IN SIDEBAR}**

## **ALERT! Post Office No Longer Recognizing Mail Sent To VSEA HQ Using Defunct P.O. Box Number**

### **Stewards Urged To Review Cards**

VSEA is issuing an alert to members NOT to use P.O. Box 518 when sending mail or other correspondence to VSEA headquarters in Montpelier. The Post Office is no longer forwarding mail sent to VSEA with the P.O. Box number. VSEA Stewards and other leaders are being asked to review any cards or literature you may be passing out in worksites to ensure the address printed on the material does not include the now defunct P.O. Box number.

As a reminder, VSEA's new and correct mailing address is:

VSEA HQ  
155 State St.  
Montpelier, VT 05602

## **VSEA Election Season Phone Banking Underway. Volunteer Today!**

VSEA Legislative Director Ben Palkowski is soliciting volunteers to participate in upcoming phone banks to promote your union's endorsed candidates in the 2014 election, both statewide and local.

Here are the phone bank dates (all will operate from 1:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. at VSEA headquarters in Montpelier):

Monday, October 27  
Thursday, October 30

Members with questions—or members who want to phone bank but can't make one of the scheduled banks—are welcome to contact Palkowski ([bpalkowski@vsea.org](mailto:bpalkowski@vsea.org) or 595-3558) to try and set up an alternate time or ask your question.

## **Retirees' Chapter Holding Special Meeting On Dec. 11 To Select Trustee For Windham & Windsor Counties**

The VSEA Retirees' Committee is actively searching for a trustee to represent Windham and Windsor Counties. If you're a current dues-paying retiree who resides in Windham or Windsor Counties, and you're interested in running for this trustee seat, please send a letter of interest by 4:30 p.m., Wednesday, December 10, to VSEA RC President Maclay at [jmaclay@vsea.org](mailto:jmaclay@vsea.org).



Chapter officials will then hold a special meeting on December 11 to name a new Windham and Windsor trustee. The meeting begins at 9:30 a.m.

As always, if you are a lifetime member of VSEA and are interested in joining the VSEA Retirees' Chapter, please send your \$10 dues check to VSEA HQ or bring this payment to the special Chapter meeting on December 11.

### **VSEA Wants Member Input On Website Redesign!**

In the coming months, VSEA's Communications team will be devoting time to redesigning the VSEA website, making it cleaner and more user friendly. In advance of sitting down to begin the redesign process, VSEA's Communications team is asking members to please take a few minutes to complete an online survey about VSEA's current site and about what members want in a new site. VSEA is also interested in learning what websites appeal to you and why, and what websites aren't so appealing and why.

To take the VSEA website survey, please [click here](#). Thanks in advance for your participation.

### **Upcoming Meetings/Events/Holidays:**

#### **October 25**

Alliance for Retired Americans  
Aldrich Public Library  
6 Washington Street  
Barre  
10:00 a.m.

#### **October 28**

Public Assets' Forum: AHS & The Budget  
VIT Studios – See WIA Story For Info  
6:00 p.m.

#### **October 29**

**Deadline To Register To Vote In 2014 General Election!**

#### **October 30**

Barre Chapter Legislator Meet-And-Greet  
The Quarry Restaurant  
210 N. Main St.  
Barre  
5:00 p.m.