

Busloads of Scientology members protest verdict

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Pushing a baby stroller towering with blankets, Jennifer Decker of Eagle Rock was among hundreds of Church of Scientology members who boarded buses, planes and trains Saturday bound for Portland, Ore., to protest a \$39 million court judgment against the international church.

An Oregon jury awarded the multimillion-dollar judgment on Friday to a woman who claimed the church defrauded her, which prompted church president the Rev. Heber Jentzsch to organize the pilgrimage to Portland.

Decker was among 200 people who filled four school buses outside the church's Hollywood headquarters while others jammed vans, campers and motor homes stacked with coolers, sleeping bags and luggage.

"The issue is of religious freedom," Decker said moments before leaving for two days with her husband, Miles, and their two children. "I don't think anyone has the right to take that from us. Plus it's for the sake of all religion."

Jentzsch, speaking to 2,500 people that spilled into North Berendo Street in Hollywood, said his church and the First Amendment were violated by the lawsuit charging that the woman was defrauded by promises to improve her eyesight and intelligence.

The lawsuit alleges that church officials knowingly made false statements to Julie Christofferson Tachbourne of Portland that dealt with secular issues of improving her mind and eyesight.

Jurors awarded \$20 million in punitive damages against Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard, \$17.5 million against the Church of Scientology of California and \$1.5 million against the Church of Scientology Mission of Davis.

"The issue is whether religious freedom is going to survive in the United States," said Jentzsch, flanked by banners reading, "Sink the IRS — not religion" and "Restore the Bill of Rights."

"We are going to fill the streets of Oregon with people who will show that religious liberty means something to them," he said.