



AFSCME rallies for new contract at Clackamas Co.

About 100 people turned out in Oregon City for a noontime rally Jan. 23 in support of members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 350 locked in difficult contract talks with their employer — Clackamas County.

The union has filed an unfair labor practice complaint for unilaterally implementing a new payroll schedule in the midst of the current contract negotiations. Local 350 represents about 350 county employees in the 911 center, transportation, development, water and environmental services departments. The 911 employees are not allowed to strike and work under a separate contract.

The county employees have been working without a contract since June 30, 2006. Bargaining on a new agreement began May 11, but disagreements over health insurance premiums have bogged down talks.

According to union spokesman Don Loving, Clackamas County wants a 95-5 split on the cost of employee health insurance. "The county is insist-

ing on a cap on its contribution, meaning Local 350 members would likely see their percentage rise considerably above 5 percent next year," he said.

In mid-December a mediator was called in, but after three sessions there has been little movement. The Jan. 23 rally coincided with the third round of mediated talks. The next mediated session is scheduled for Feb. 15.

Local 350 President Rob Hungerford says his colleagues deserve respect. "We are the employees who make this county run," he said. "Managers are in line to get big bonuses, but they can't find money for our wages and health insurance costs."

AFSCME Oregon Council 75 Executive Director Ken Allen told rally-goers, "Clackamas County needs to understand who they're picking a fight with. They're not just going up against Local 350. They're about to get on the wrong side of a large, statewide union that has over \$600,000 in its strike fund. They need to come to the table and settle, because we won't be scared away."

Bus strike looms in Corvallis

City transit and school bus operators reject Laidlaw's final offer, authorize strike

CORVALLIS — Corvallis's transit and school bus drivers turned thumbs down to a proposal by Laidlaw Transit, Inc. that, in effect, would rip up wage gains attained over the past six years.

More than 65 bus operators — 10 at the city and 55 at the school district — are represented by Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757. Their contract expired on June 30, 2006.

On Jan. 23, bus operators voted overwhelmingly to reject Laidlaw's contract proposal and at the same time authorized a strike.

Canadian-based Laidlaw Transit has contracts to provide public transit and school bus service in Corvallis. It is the largest transportation company in North America and is notorious for opposing unions.

Drivers from both the City of Corvallis and the school district joined Local 757 in 1997, but ran into one roadblock after another trying to get a first contract. They walked off the job several times and filled City Council meetings numerous times to protest shoddy treatment.

In fact, it was Laidlaw's resistance to the union that led to a 1999 ballot measure in which Corvallis voters — by a wide margin — approved an ordinance stipulating that wages and benefits for

city transit workers be based on the wages and benefits of other transit workers within a 100-mile radius. The prevailing wage law went into effect July 1, 2000.

The issue for city bus operators centers around a service contract between the City of Corvallis and Laidlaw. According to Ron Heintzman, an international vice president for the ATU and a former president of Local 757, wages in the bus operators' first contract were patterned after the prevailing wage ordinance, and benefits mirrored those received by Corvallis city employees.

"We agreed to that because the city was anticipating taking bus service in-house," Heintzman said.

That transition never happened.

To further complicate matters, the city didn't update the minimum wage and benefit requirements when it renewed its service contract with Laidlaw.

As a result, when the union came looking for wage and benefit increases comparable to those received by city employees, Laidlaw refused, taking the position that unless the city changed its contract in regard to minimum wages and benefits, they wouldn't agree to any changes.

That position has caused the parties to reach impasse, with the union contending that it will not be locked into a contract with no changes for life.

Heintzman said the union came to the bargaining table with 14 items, but narrowed its requests to just three: a 3.5 percent annual raise, an increase in life insurance from \$20,000 to the annual

wage of a driver, and sick leave pay-out comparable to city employees.

"Laidlaw's position is totally unacceptable and to this point in time the city has done nothing to correct it," he said, adding that any increases on Laidlaw could be directly passed through to the city.

In the school bus driver dispute, after six years the union was finally able to bargain a five-year step increase on wages. That step increase was ratified in the 2003 contract, but didn't take effect until the last day of the contract (June 30, 2006).

As a concession to get the step increases, bus drivers agreed to take a wage increase on the last day of the contract, instead of at the beginning, which is typical in other contracts.

In the proposal drivers rejected on Jan. 23, Heintzman said Laidlaw had eliminated step increases and gone back to the original wage structure, totally discounting the past six-year bargaining history.

Additionally, Laidlaw applied the June 30, 2006 raise to its new contract proposal — meaning they didn't offer any raises for the first year of the proposed contract.

"These are strike issues," Heintzman warned, "and our guys have given authorization to do so."

"The question now is whether the parents of Corvallis K-12 students are willing to jeopardize their children's safety to a Canadian corporation that is only interested in profit."

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