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Letter Carriers' new pact may slow outsourcing

The U.S. Postal Service (USPS) is contracting out mail delivery at a new apartment complex in Hillsboro, Oregon, even though a union challenge has yet to be resolved over a decision to privatize deliveries in Beaverton.

But a new national contract settlement may slow down any further plans to privatize city delivery. On July 12, the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) reached tentative agreement with the USPS on a new five-year union contract covering all 222,000 active city delivery carriers throughout the nation. [Rural carriers are covered under a separate contract with a different union, and rural delivery has long been privatized.]

The NALC agreement bars USPS from outsourcing any existing routes. And for new routes, the agreement imposes a six-month moratorium on contracting out while a new national joint labor-management committee works out a set of rules to govern contracting out.

It's not clear how that will affect the decision to privatize delivery to the new Nexus Apartments, near Hillsboro's Orenco Station. Nexus is slated to open in August, at which point as many as 422 units will need postal delivery. Rather than assign the new deliveries to union letter carriers like the ones who deliver all around the area, Hillsboro postmaster Daniel Stearns invited bids from private contractors. The deadline for bids was July 9, but as of press time the contract had not yet been awarded.

NALC Branch 82 was alarmed in March when a Beaverton postmaster assigned the new Arbor Parc Bethany housing development to a private contractor. Branch 82 filed a grievance against the decision on the grounds that management had not properly notified the union or given adequate reason for the decision. Over a dozen such grievances have been filed around the country as local postmasters act on a mandate from top brass to cut costs by privatizing. All the grievances have been put on hold while a couple of test cases go forward to set the precedent for the others.

Branch 82 filed a grievance on the Hillsboro case as well.

It's not clear yet how the contract settlement will affect those cases, but many more instances of contracting out that were in the works will at least be put on hold.

NALC Branch 82 Vice President Kelly Pindell was on her way to talk to contracting-out specialist Ken Seward when she saw a grease board with local management's plans. On the grease board was a list of new developments to be contracted out: the 304-unit Pacific Crossing housing development in Forest Grove; the 164-unit Taralon development in Happy Valley; Oregon City's 296-unit Sequoia Landing and 450-unit The Cove; as many as 15,000 units at

Evergreen Arbor Woods in Beaverton; and any new developments on the St. Mary's parcel in Aloha.

The Beaverton development alone would mean about 40 full-time union jobs.

Stopping postal privatization has been the union's top priority. NALC leaders say postal privatization will lead to higher turnover and lower accountability, and will decrease public confidence in the safety of the mail. In the U.S. House of Representatives, a non-binding bill calling on USPS to stop contracting out mail delivery has 224 co-sponsors including all four Oregon Democrats and Southwest Washington Democrat Brian Baird. In the Senate, 33 senators have signed on as co-sponsors to a bill to limit contracting out to places with less than one delivery point per mile. Oregon Democrat Ron Wyden and Washington's Maria Cantwell and Patty Murray are co-sponsors.

In a letter to U.S. senators, the postmaster general pleaded that privatization would create opportunities for small minority- and women-owned businesses.

"Oh yeah, the right to have an exploited job as a contractor," Pindell said. Thousands of women and people of color would love to have union letter carrier jobs, Pindell said, but USPS isn't doing much hiring in part because many new routes are going to contractors.

The new five-year contract also contains wage increases of about 1.8 percent a year in addition to cost-of-living adjustments. The agreement is subject to ratification by union members and the Postal Board of Governors. In an unprecedented rebuff to management, the Bush-appointed majority on the Postal Board rejected the previous contract settlement. The second agreement came as the two sides were about to submit their final offers to binding interest arbitration. The previous NALC contract expired last November.

Workshop to focus on job training

Apprenticeship coordinators from Oregon and Southwest Washington will host a workshop on job training opportunities available in the world of construction.

The workshop, which will offer a general overview of apprenticeships — qualifications and requirements, program benefits and occupations, will be held from 10 a.m. to noon on Friday, Aug. 3, at the HVAC & Metals Institute Training Center of Sheet Metal Workers Local 16, 2379 NE 178th, Portland.

For more information or to register, call Labor's Community Service Agency at 503-231-4962.