

Laborers Union gets health insurance for seasonal crew

A newly-signed union contract contains a major breakthrough for several hundred City of Portland seasonal maintenance workers. Thanks to bargaining and behind-the-scenes political work by Laborers Local 483, the workers will now get health insurance coverage when they return to work for a second year at the City.

Portland may be the only city in the country to offer health benefits to seasonal employees, Local 483 Business Manager Richard Beetle and City of Portland Human Resources Director Yvonne Deckard told Portland City Council Jan. 9 — before the council voted to ratify the contract. The seasonal workers typically work less than half the year for the City. And the Bureau of Human Resources (BHR) couldn't find any insurer to offer a policy for such a group.

Beetle said it took one-on-one appeals to City Council members before BHR would relent; before, management negotiators had said it was impossible. Then Mayor Tom Potter said, basically, "make it happen" and BHR came up with a plan to self-insure.

"This shows that we do have a pro-

gressive council," Beetle said.

Seasonal maintenance workers are among the lowest-paid City workers, and bargain separately from other groups.

'Health care is a basic human need. But one that's not attainable to City employees earning seasonal worker wages without the assistance of the City.'

who were concerned about increased use of temporary, seasonal workers.

The City hires 250 to 300 seasonal workers in any given year, Beetle said. Most are hired in the spring and summer by the Bureau of Parks & Recreation to mow grass, pick up leaves, and clean restrooms. About 20 help with street maintenance at the Bureau of Maintenance. And about 10 do routine fire hydrant maintenance for the Water Bureau.

Typically, about half will return to work for the City again the following year.

The union has no objection to the City using such temps for work that is truly seasonal, Beetle said, but it

wants to take away economic incentives to use seasonals to do work that could be done by full-time, year-round employees. Bringing seasonals' wages and benefits closer to those permanent employees does that — and of course is also a tremendous boon to the seasonal workers themselves.

The new contract has a four-year term and is retroactive to July 1, 2007, when the old contract expired. Under the new contract, employees in their second year of work can register for health benefits starting May 2008, get insurance by July 1, and then remain insured for the duration of their employment that season. Workers pay 10 percent of the premium cost, which currently is \$460 a month for worker-only coverage, \$660 a month for a worker and a spouse, and \$1,080 for full-family coverage. Beetle said cost estimates to the city for insuring the group range from \$400,000 to \$1 million a year.

The new agreement also raises wages by the cost-of-living index, with a minimum of 2 percent a year and a maximum of 5 percent. The workers currently make between \$10 and \$11 an hour.

And the contract raises the boot allowance from \$50 to \$120, every other year. Giving a sense of what ne-

gotiations were like, Beetle said the City spent two months arguing over the boot allowance.

It's still a substandard contract in some respects, Beetle said. There's only a very limited grievance procedure, and unlike most union workers, the seasonals under this contract are an "at-will" workforce, meaning they can be fired for any cause or no cause.

The City also was able to lengthen the amount of time seasonals can work, thanks to a change to the City Charter that voters approved in May 2007. Previously they were limited to 860 hours in any calendar year, or about five months at 40 hours a week.

Now they'll be limited to 1,200 hours, about seven months. Local 483 opposed Measure 26-90, fearing it would open the door to greater use of temps. But the way it worked out, Beetle said, increasing the hour limit made offering health benefits more feasible.

"Health care is a basic human need," Beetle told council members Jan. 9, but one that's "not attainable to City employees earning seasonal worker wages without the assistance of the City."

The new contract won praise from commissioners and was approved by unanimous vote.



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