

Bend newspaper spurns union ad supporting bus drivers

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

BEND — Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757 wanted to tell its side of the story. The 40 or so bus drivers and support staff of Bend Area Transit voted 15 months ago to join ATU, but they still don't have a union contract. To appeal to the community, ATU decided to place a large ad in the April 15 issue of the community's daily newspaper, the Bend Bulletin.

The ad was supposed to be entitled, "Why Take From Those Who Already Have The Least?" It would criticize Bend City Council plans to freeze wages for bus drivers and eliminate Sunday bus service for the disabled. And it would publicize a union rally scheduled for April 16.

On the morning of Thursday, April 10, ATU staffperson Catharine Alexander e-mailed the text of the ad to the Bulletin's ad department.

Bulletin account executive Lisa McCaw-Legg wrote back just before noon to say the union would need to back up the claims made in the ad. Alexander sent supporting documents less than two hours later. That wasn't enough. They would need line-by-line detail, McGraw-Legg wrote. Again, Alexander complied, numbering each claim, circling supporting facts in red pen, providing phone numbers for further backup. In all, supporting documents came to 16 pages.

By now it was mid-day Friday. McGraw-Legg wrote back to say they were bumping up against the deadline for ads in the Tuesday edition. Could the ad run April 16 instead? No, Alexander replied. McGraw-Legg wrote back that the ad manager and ad director would need to review every page of the documents, and they wouldn't be able to do that in time to run the ad.

Okay, Alexander wrote back, what if the union does agree to run it April

16? Now McCaw-Legg wrote that it couldn't run April 16 either — the ad managers were both out of town and wouldn't be able to look at it until Monday.

"We're thinking the contents of the ad are timeless," Alexander wrote back, "so instead of using it to get people to the rally we might want to use it for general information."

When would the Bulletin be able to publish it, Alexander asked. McGraw-Legg answered: after the directors approve the content. Shortly thereafter, she e-mailed Alexander again: "I spoke to my manager who went over the materials that you provided. He said that we will require verification of your information and not a list of phone numbers and people to call."

All this trouble to place a one-time ad, for which the union would pay \$570? ATU was about ready to scrap the idea of running an ad in the Bend Bulletin.

Then, on April 20, the paper's editorial board spoke, in a one-sided editorial entitled, "Union makes a big request." The editorial chastised the union for demanding a "44 percent raise" for bus operators at the same time a budget shortfall was forcing the layoff of other city workers. Local 757, headquartered in Portland, was called out as a "Portland union." No mention was made of the drivers' out-of-town employer. Private not-for-profit Paratransit Services, based in Bremerton, Washington, runs the city's contracted-out bus service. Twice more, the editorial mentioned the "44 percent raise." And the editors made sure readers knew of the union's internal troubles — a secretary-treasurer was removed last year and is being prosecuted for misappropriation of funds.

Then, on April 28, the Bend Bulletin published an ad from the employer — the same size ad ATU had planned, entitled "Paratransit Services

sets the record straight." In the ad, Paratransit praises its record of partnering with the Bend community to provide transportation services. Paratransit "cares about its employees," the Paratransit ad says. "Example — paid for an employee's family member's funeral when they did not have the funds."

But then the Portland union came to town.

"Paratransit Services is currently engaged in contract negotiations with a large union out of Portland, Oregon," the ad says. "The Portland union continues to characterize the drivers as earning an \$11 an hour wage rate," but "a number of Paratransit Services' employees earn well over that amount, some earning at least \$14.80 an hour."

Employees have received a 3 to 4 percent annual increase the last five years, the ad says, and "the Portland union" rejected Paratransit's offer of "very significant wage increases" ranging from 9 to 15 percent. "The Portland union continues to insist on wage and benefit increases that amount to approximately an additional \$2.8 million in expenses over a three-year period," the ad said, and "is now threatening a strike if they don't get what they want."

What happened to the painstaking factual rigor the Bend Bulletin demanded as a condition of publishing the union ad? ATU officials say both the editorial and the Paratransit ad were full of untruths, half-truths, and distortions. The "3 to 4 percent raises" are step increases for individual employees who stay on, not increases in the underlying pay scale, frozen now for five years. The driver starting wage — \$11 an hour five years ago — is \$11 an hour today. The "very significant" 9 to 15 percent wage offer is in reality for a 3 to 5 percent annual cost-of-living increase — over a three-year period. It does nothing to address the union's contention that Bend drivers make far less than drivers at any com-

parable district. That's why to begin catch up, the union is proposing a \$1-an-hour raise in the first year. That's 6.7 to 9 percent, not the 44 percent stated repeatedly in the editorial. As for how a \$1-an-hour raise for 40 workers could add up to Paratransit's "additional \$2.8 million in expenses"

(\$23,000 more per worker per year), that's more than union math can figure. Oh, and the funeral for the employee's family member? To the best of the union's knowledge, it was paid for out of Paratransit's "Sunshine Fund," funded by employee contribu-

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Bend labor forum May 22 will focus on immigration

BEND — A forum on "The Labor Movement: Immigration, Workers Rights and Free Trade: Race to the Bottom or Vision for the Future?" will be held on Thursday May 22, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the Red Lion Inn, 1415 NE Third Street, Bend.

Speakers will include Oregon Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian, Oregon State Rep. Brad Witt, Brad Porterfield from Latino Community Association, Arthur Stamoulis of Oregon Fair Trade, and Aeryca Steinbauer and Lorena Manzo from CAUSA, Oregon's immigrant rights coalition.

The event is free and co-sponsored by the Central Oregon Labor Council. For more information, call 503-701-6701.

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