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DELIVERY AFTER DARK

Short-staffing forces letter carriers to finish delivering their expanding mail routes in the dark

Letter carriers have March 14 circled on their calendars. That's when daylight saving time begins — and the extra hour or so of sunlight will be a godsend.

Short-staffing at the United States Post Office has resulted in the consolidation of mail routes. On many days that extra load forces letter carriers to continue delivering mail long after the sun has gone down. And that can make for dangerous working conditions.

In daylight hours, buckled sidewalks, wet leaves, low-hanging tree branches, garden hoses, and dogs can be seen —and avoided. Not so in the dark.

Carriers say walking routes after nightfall puts them at greater risk of slipping and tripping or being bitten. In December, a letter carrier from Eastern Jackson County, Missouri, was killed after being struck by a car while delivering mail after nightfall.

"This repeated after-dark delivery is the worst I've seen in my 25-year career," said Jamie Partridge, a member of Letter Carriers Branch 82 who works out of Piedmont Station in Northeast Portland.

Union requests that management provide adequate staffing to avoid working late hours — especially during the higher mail volume months of November and December — were spurned.

"Local management says it doesn't have the authority to hire additional carriers — not even transitional (non-career) employees," said Branch 82 President Jim Cook. "We were told that in order to get approval from regional level USPS management to hire additional carriers for Portland, the performance indicators must be at an acceptable level. Based on management's criteria, they say we are more than 50 employees over complement."

The union filed numerous grievances, pointing to a memorandum of understanding in its collective bargaining agreement stating that "delivery after dark is both inefficient and unsafe, therefore, it is not the intent to require carriers to deliver after dark ..."

The grievances were successful, with letter carriers winning settlements of $50 per after-dark violation, resulting in thousands of dollars in awards.

But that didn't stop the after dark delivery. In meetings with carriers, local USPS management insisted that delivery after dark was "not inherently unsafe." Some letter carriers were issued headlamps.

The union reached out to Oregon's congressional representatives for help, including U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley. In early January, Branch 82 filed a class-action grievance on behalf of all Portland area carriers.

The grievance process can involve multiple steps. One briefing was held last week, with more scheduled later this month — after clocks are turned forward an hour.

(Editor's Note: The front page photo is of Letter Carrier Jamie Partridge sorting through mail with help of a headlamp. The photo was taken by LaVern Simmons.)

Stimulus act — one year later

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

Feb. 17, 2010, marked one year since the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) — better-known as the federal economic stimulus package — was signed into law.

In the public mind, ARRA has frequently been confused with the $700 billion October 2008 bank bailout known as the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP). ARRA has also been widely mischaracterized as a "jobs" bill in which the federal government would quickly spend roughly $800 billion.

In fact, that dollar figure is the bill's estimated budget impact over a 10-year period, and two-fifths of it ($320 billion) consists of tax cuts, while much of the remainder would be better described as relief spending — unemployment benefits, health care assistance, and one-time $250 bonus checks to Social Security recipients. About one-sixteenth ($50 billion) went to bail out states to prevent teacher layoffs. Less than a tenth of the bill's price tag ($80 billion) was dedicated to traditional job-creation efforts such as spending on infrastructure.

ProPublica, a non-profit investigative journalism group that has been tracking stimulus spending, reported that as of March 1, $190 billion in stimulus funds had been spent, and $119 billion of the tax cuts had taken effect, for a total impact on the economy of $309 billion.

On the one-year anniversary of ARRA's signing, top Obama Administration officials touted ARRA's successes and insisted it had "created or saved" 2 million jobs. But top union leaders either praised the stimulus while saying it was too small, or said nothing at all. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka made no statement. Change To Win labor federation Chair Anna Burger said hundreds of thousands of Americans who are now employed as a direct result of the stimulus law can thank congressional Democrats who "championed the legislation that stopped the bleeding in a devastating recession."

No House Republican voted for ARRA, and only three Senate Republicans did so. Oregon's Fourth District Congressman Peter DeFazio was one of just seven Democrats to vote against the bill's final version, saying it had too many tax cuts and not enough investment in programs to create jobs. DeFazio — who chairs the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee's Highways and Transit Subcommittee — is a longtime advocate of federal infrastructure investment. The Labor Press spoke with him by phone Feb. 25.

***LABOR PRESS:* A year ago, you were pretty critical of the stimulus act. What's your assessment today?**

DEFAZIO: I'd say I was right. I often ask people what they did with their tax cut that put people back to work, and everybody says, "What tax cut? I didn't get a tax cut."

And I say, "Yeah, your withholding was reduced by like $12 a week last year, and $8 a week this year. All that money was borrowed, and your grandkids are gonna still be paying for it." And people are dismayed to hear that.

There was about seven times as much money devoted to tax cuts in the bill as there was to infrastructure investment. I would say the infrastructure investment worked very well. We did a number of projects related to roads, bridges, highways and transit. They all had Buy America requirements, so we kept the money home, and put people to work at good wages because of Davis-Bacon [the requirement to pay

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Labor's reaction to special session of Legislature mixed

SALEM — Before the Feb. 25 adjournment of the 2010 Special Session, the majority-Democratic Oregon Legislature passed a variety of bills important to organized labor. Those included:

• A ban on employers considering job applicants' credit history. Authored by State Sen. Diane Rosenbaum (D-Portland), the bill bans the use of credit checks for the purpose of hiring or promotion, with an exception for public safety employees. It passed largely on party lines, with Democrats in support and Republicans opposing. One Republican, Rep. Kim Thatcher (Keizer), voted for it, while four Democrats voted against it: State Sen. Martha Schrader and State Reps. Jeff Barker (Aloha), Brent Barton (Clackamas), and Dave Edwards (Hillsboro).

• A six-week extension of unemployment insurance benefits. Passed unanimously in both chambers, the bill

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