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Conciliator has TriMet and ATU talking after threat of strike

Amid threats of a wildcat transit strike, a state conciliator on Jan. 28 persuaded leaders of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 757 and TriMet to take a step back and try to resolve their differences.

"It's probably the most movement we've seen from TriMet so far," said Local 757 President Jonathan Hunt. "But we're not there yet."

A second meeting was scheduled Feb. 2 (after this issue of the Labor Press went to press).

The sides have been engaged in a labor dispute since the old contract expired Nov. 30, 2009. State law prohibits transit workers from striking and requires that all contract disputes be settled by binding arbitration.

However, at a TriMet board meeting Jan. 26, Hunt said union members — frustrated by the transit agency's "illegal implementation" of health insurance premium copays — are ready to stop bus and train service.

"Every single day I hear from my members, 'you guys (TriMet) are breaking the law, you don't care about binding arbitration, so why should we?'" Hunt said. "I'm telling you, our group is asking and going to put forward reductions within our workforce; you are going to

have service stopped. You are telling us, 'the law means nothing.'"

The union has filed two unfair labor practice (ULP) complaints with the

Oregon Employment Relations Board. One alleges that TriMet changed its bargaining position when petitioning for arbitration in July 2010. The other is for unilaterally changing their agreement over health insurance costs, a move the union says was in retaliation for filing the first ULP.

TriMet had been honoring the terms of the expired contract until this year, when it started charging active and retired members for a portion of their health insurance premiums. The increase in monthly out-of-pocket costs ranges from \$15.31 to \$234.70, depending on the carrier and coverage.

The Oregon Employment Relations Board isn't expected to hear the cases until May. But before leaving office, Gov. Ted Kulongoski asked state conciliator Robert Nightingale to "clear his schedule" in order to assist the sides in resolving the dispute. The Jan. 28 meeting proved fruitful.

Meantime, the union has been holding large rallies prior to TriMet board meetings to inform the public of the alleged illegal actions, and packing those meetings to plead with board members to get TriMet General Manager Neil McFarlane to rescind his order on health insurance copays.

The seven-person TriMet board of directors is appointed by the governor.

"Somehow there is this perception we're not willing to move on health insurance copays," Hunt told the Labor Press. "That's just not true. But you can't shove it down our throats and expect us to say 'thank you.'"

At the Jan. 26 board meeting, Hunt said TriMet was getting "bad advice" from its attorneys — advice that ultimately could cost the agency millions of dollars in backpay and penalties.

He offered to pull the two unfair labor practice complaints if TriMet reversed the change in health insurance and returned to the bargaining table.

"In one day," Hunt told the board, "we could deal with these unfair labor practice issues and come to an agreement on a new contract, if TriMet is willing to recognize what we see as unlawful actions and put a stop to them."

Hunt also invited board members to sit in on negotiations to see first-hand what is being proposed.

"I'll commit to (bargain) every single day that Mr. McFarlane will commit," Hunt said. If at the end of the day, an agreement can't be reached, Hunt suggested the sides sign a joint letter to

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Steve Fung, a member of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757 and a part-time bus operator at TriMet, joined about 100 people Jan. 26 in front of the downtown Portland Building, site of a TriMet board of directors meeting, to protest the transit agency's Jan. 1 unilateral change to health insurance premiums. Fung, who was TriMet's "Part-Time Operator of the Year" last year, said his goal is to help inform the public that operators aren't getting a free ride and the implemented contract is having serious ramifications — especially among retirees.

In Oregon and Washington

Carpenters dissolve 15 locals, charter four new locals

United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America dissolved 15 of its Oregon and Washington locals effective Jan. 24, and replaced them with four newly-chartered locals, one local each for general carpenters, millwrights, pile drivers, and drywall carpenters. The changes, which were outlined in a letter to members from General President Doug McCarron, also include dues reductions and a shift to a new centralized dispatch system run by the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters.

The union will close some offices and lay off some office staff. The dissolved locals — 247, 1388, 1065, 1707, 1001, 2154, 1715, 1273, 306, 2067, 711, 204, 1699, 2416, and 2396 — had a combined membership of about 7,000, according to the most recent filings with the U.S. Department of Labor.

Newly-chartered Carpenters Local 156 now represents all general carpenters in the state of Oregon, plus four Southwest Washington counties (Clark, Skamania, Cowlitz, Wahkiakum), totaling about 4,000 members. Local 156 comprises members of former locals 247, 1388, 1065, 1707, 1001 and 2067, plus carpenter members in mixed locals 1715, 306, and 1273. McCarron appointed Doug Tweedy interim president and Wayne Frazey interim financial secretary.

In that same Oregon and Southwest Washington area, all drywall hangers now belong to newly-chartered Interior Systems Local 146. It comprises former interior/exterior Local 2154 plus interior specialists from mixed locals 306, 1273, and 1715, for a combined membership of roughly 1,300 members. McCarron appointed Bruce Epstein in-

terim president and Norman Curry interim financial secretary.

Both locals — Local 156 and Local 146 — will be headquartered in the union hall that formerly belonged to Local 1388, at 276 Warner-Milne Rd. in Oregon City, Oregon.

Meanwhile, all pile driver members in Oregon, Washington, Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming now belong to newly-chartered Pile Drivers Local 196, which takes as its headquarters the former Local 2396 hall at 4696 Pacific Hwy East in Fife, Washington. Local 196 includes about 1,000 members from former locals 2416 and 2396, plus any pile driver who belonged to a mixed local in those states. McCarron appointed Dena Rempelos interim president and Leiter Hockett interim financial secretary.

Finally, all millwrights in Oregon,

Washington, Montana, and Idaho are now members of newly-chartered Millwrights Local 96, which will use former Local 1699's office at 515 N. Neel St in Kennewick, Washington as its headquarters. The new local combines about 700 millwrights from locals 711, 204, and 1699, plus any millwrights from mixed locals — except for Metal Trades Local 2403 at Hanford, Washington, and Local 808 in Idaho Falls, Idaho, which continue as autonomous locals. McCarron appointed Dave Rupe interim president and Justin McClendon interim financial secretary.

All assets of the dissolved locals are being transferred to the regional council. Some or all of those assets may be apportioned among the newly established locals, McCarron said in the letter.

Not all of the 15 dissolved locals

had offices and staff, but some did. The Carpenters-owned buildings on the 2200 block of N. Lombard St. in Portland and at 3655 Kashmir Way SE in Salem are said to be up for sale.

The consolidation reduces overhead and duplication of services, and thus allows local dues to be reduced, explained Regional Council Executive Secretary-Treasurer Doug Tweedy in letters to members of each local.

"While we are proud of where we have been and the local unions that helped us to achieve so much," Tweedy said in the letters, "our general president has signaled that we must continue to adapt to the industry's changes or be left behind."

For all four of the new local unions, dispatching will now be centralized and operated by the regional council using a new automated system.