

Who's On Our Side?

By Tom Chamberlain



Imagine a job where a worker's shift is 14 hours long, seven days a week. No sick leave, no health care, vacation or workers' compensation. Oh, I forgot to mention: You also have to pay your employer as much as \$580 a week for the privilege of working for their company. Of course, we all know such employment relations could never happen in America. Right?!

These are the working conditions more than 400 Portland cab drivers experience every day. They are forced to pay the company up to \$580 a week for dispatch and advertising, whether the driver works or not. Want to go on vacation? Pay the taxi company the \$1,160 dispatch fee during your two-week vacation while your taxi cab sits idle. On a good month, a cab driver earns about \$4,000 plus tips — after paying the taxi company \$2,320 and setting aside a little tip to their dispatcher for sending fares their way.

On a bad month, cabbies pay the same fees and lose money. This is a system designed to make profits for the company while the cabby shoulders all the risk — paying company fees and maintenance and gas on the cabs most of them are required to own.

Taxi companies get away with this form of indentured servitude because they classify cab drivers as independent contractors. But cabbies work for one company and the company has di-

rection and control of the cabbies' work activities. Recently, the Oregon Employment Department audited taxi companies and ruled that cabbies do not meet federal criteria for independent contractor status and are therefore entitled to Oregon unemployment insurance benefits. Translation: the taxi companies now have to pay the unemployment tax like any other employer.

At this point many of you are wondering why the cabbies don't rise up and fight the taxi companies. Fear is the main reason; many cabbies are recent immigrants from Eastern Africa trying to learn English, make a living and settle in to their new home. Those individuals who do speak out often find themselves without a job. It's no surprise that when the taxi companies circulated a petition to support Oregon Senate Bill 257 to exempt cabbies from unemployment insurance, the cabbies signed it. This same tactic was used decades ago to exempt cabbies from Oregon workers' compensation.

I would be unfair if I didn't mention that Radio Cab is different. It is a co-op: the drivers own the company, they determine the fees (currently \$200 versus \$580 a week), they determine how the company operates, what benefits are provided, etc. Most cabbies want to work for Radio Cab but can't because their fleet is limited and preference is given to veterans.

Recently, I met with Communication Workers of America Local 7901 President Madelyn Elder and a group of courageous cabbies who are fighting for their rights. Based upon a co-op model, they have developed a business plan and found financial backing to start a new cab company in Portland — Union Cab.

The fate of Union Cab is now in the hands of the City of Portland, which will make a final decision whether or not they can operate in Portland, and how many cabs they can operate.

At this point, the CWA cabbies are forced to stay in the shadows, still fearful of company reprisals, remaining silent on legislation that would eliminate their benefits. Instead, we will be standing with CWA fighting to ensure they are treated with dignity and respect and ensure that no one rolls back their unemployment insurance benefits in Salem.

Who is on your side, Portland cabbies? CWA 7901. By choosing to support co-op cab companies and, once they're formed, Union Cab, you can be too.

Tom Chamberlain is president of the Oregon AFL-CIO.

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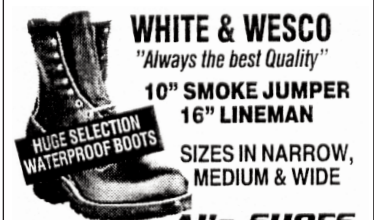
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