

Bus drivers at Portland Public Schools ink new deal

By DON MCINTOSH
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

School bus drivers at Portland Public Schools have a new union contract — 14 months after their old one expired. The settlement, with bus contractor First Student, came three weeks after an Oct. 3 strike vote by the 220-worker bargaining unit. The drivers are members of Portland-based Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757.

But the agreement is likely to be a temporary peace, said Anna Tompte, a member of the Local 757 Executive Board. Tompte — who drives students at Hayhurst, Rieke, and Robert Gray schools — will soon be back negotiating with First Student. The new contract expires in less than 10 months. And bargaining begins Jan. 26 for a separate contract covering bus mechanics.

First Student is a division of First Group, a multi-national transit industry contractor based in the United Kingdom.

Even as Portland Public Schools bus drivers settle for now, their fellow Local 757 members have authorized a strike at First Transit, which has a contract with TriMet to drive the vans that transport the disabled. First Transit is a

separate division of First Group, but uses the same negotiators.

And all around the Portland metro area, units of First Student have their own fights with the company. Three groups of workers represented by Oregon School Employees Association (OSEA) are waiting for a federal judge's decision in a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) case that has been under way since mid-2010. In its investigation, the NLRB found that First Student repeatedly violated federal labor law and failed to bargain in good faith with OSEA-represented school bus drivers at the Gresham-Barlow, Lake Oswego, and Molalla school districts — canceling wage increases, attendance bonuses, and matching contributions; canceling meetings and refusing to meet with union bargaining teams; refusing to answer basic questions necessary to bargain; and refusing to negotiate wages, benefits and economic issues until all non-economic issues had been agreed to.

As a for-profit enterprise, First Student makes money when it limits worker pay — and maintenance costs. Drivers interviewed by the Labor Press complained at length about problems with the buses they're given to drive —



“They send us out there with buses that are marginal,” says First Transit school bus driver Joe Clyde. Clyde, who drives students at Lincoln High School, used to work as an aircraft mechanic at United Air Lines and at Horizon. Above, he uses a tire gauge to show wear on the rear tires at the bus yard at 6755 NE Columbia Blvd. Under a new six-year contract with the district, however, First Student will bring in new buses next year and retire old ones.

frequent breakdowns, bald tires, broken two-way radios. Don Morrison, who drives students at Vestal, Whitman, and Sellwood schools, says he didn't have

an antenna for nine months, so when dispatch wanted to communicate about a lost child, they were unable to reach him. Many of the buses were purchased

in 1997, and have outlived their 10-year life expectancy. Tompte says there were 25 buses per mechanic when she started in 1993 and that today there are 50 buses per mechanic.

Many of those complaints are likely to be remedied, however, said Portland Public Schools transportation services director Andy Leibenguth. That's because under the district's new six-year, \$69-million contract with First Student, the company will be modernizing its school bus fleet next year.

For now, Tompte said drivers at Portland Public Schools are happy with the new contract. The vote to ratify was unanimous, once 30 workers who voted “no” changed their votes. Two 2.5 percent raises bring the starting wage up to \$13.22, and the top rate (reached after six years) to \$15.76 — for most work. Because the two-year contract is retroactive to Sept. 1, 2010, most drivers will get a back pay check of around \$500. Workers also got some protection against increased insurance premiums: First Student agreed to absorb all premium increases up to 12 percent, and split 50-50 any increase above that.

“We walked away with 80 percent of what we asked for,” Tompte said.

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