

TriMet uses its public e-mail list to score points against union

A government agency e-mails the public to say its employee compensation is out-of-line

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

TriMet, the Portland-area public transit district, has a well-developed Internet presence: Online users can plan trips, see when buses are coming, and sign up for e-mail updates.

But now it seems the agency is using its public e-mail list to bash its union — Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757. A Dec. 15 e-mail, sent to over 20,000 subscribing members of the public, drew readers in with its subject line: “Budget Discussion Guide now online — we want your feedback!”

“Tough budget choices are ahead,” explained the unsigned email from TriMet, “and we want to know what’s most important to you when it comes to service on the street and the price you pay to ride.”

It sounds like a public agency seeking public input, right? But click through, and TriMet explains that the projected \$12-17 million budget shortfall is brought on by lower payroll revenues, likely federal funding cuts ... and because “negotiations with the transit union over health care benefits and other cost-cutting measures are at an impasse.”

“The current trend in the cost of wages and benefits for represented (union) employees is unsustainable,” TriMet declares. “A recent Employment Relations Board decision removed certain cost-saving proposals from our final labor contract offer, so some measures we were hoping to implement—such as bringing wage and health care costs under control—likely will have to wait for a future negotiation.”

TriMet doesn’t explain, but the Employment Relations Board (ERB) is a state agency that administers Oregon’s public employee collective bargaining law. In September, ERB determined that TriMet broke state labor law — when it sent a different “final offer” to arbitration than the real final offer it had made to the union in bargaining.

That contract is heading for binding arbitration, which TriMet calls “a forum in which it is extremely difficult to make significant changes no matter how out-of-line union wages and benefits are.”

To sum up: TriMet asks for public input on service cuts and fare increases, and then uses that as an opportunity to tell the public its own union employees’ wages and benefits are “unsustainable,” out of control, and “out-of-line.”

There’s more. Click on “Tell us what you think,” and that leads to “Common Questions” like “Why not just cut pay and benefits for employees like everyone else has?” The answer, says TriMet, is that 87 percent of its employees are in the union, and TriMet can’t unilaterally change their wages and benefits. “Union leadership has refused to consider reasonable changes to wage



increases and benefits that would bring them more in line with other transit/government workers,” TriMet continues. “ATU has also been successful in its legal maneuvers to delay or exclude arbitration on TriMet’s cost-saving wage and benefit proposals.”

TriMet spokesperson Mary Fetch told the Labor Press that the e-mail had over 800 responses in the first day. She offered no support for the contention that TriMet wages are out of line, but said

health benefits — which TriMet provides for union members and their dependents — cost \$16,000 a year.

The budget discussion will continue with public meetings in February.

TriMet operates bus and light rail service in Multnomah, Clackamas, and Washington counties. It’s funded by fares and local payroll taxes, and is governed by a seven-member board appointed by the governor.



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