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One-day strike by TriMet lift operators leads to agreement

A one-day strike by TriMet Lift drivers May 9 has resulted in tentative contracts following marathon bargaining sessions May 10-11.

Details of the agreement were not released by the workers' union, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 757. Lift drivers will vote on the contracts sometime this month.

Lift operators are employed by First Transit, Inc., which subcontracts with TriMet in Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas counties to transport senior and disabled people who can't use regular mass transit in the TriMet service area. Transit agencies are required to provide lift service to the elderly and disabled under the Americans With Disabilities Act.

Lift operators in Multnomah and Washington counties are represented by Local 757 under separate collective bargaining agreements. Lift operators in Clackamas County and all call-center dispatchers are nonunion.

First Transit is a business unit of FirstGroup, a multi-national, multi-billion-dollar corporation headquartered in Aberdeen, Scotland. FirstGroup also owns First Student, which provides school bus transportation and charter services; First Services, which provides vehicle maintenance and ancillary services; First Canada, which provides school transportation, transit management and contracting services in Canada; and Greyhound.

ATU's collective bargaining agreement covering 115 lift operators in Washington County expired Dec. 1, 2011. In March, drivers rejected First Transit's contract offer, 83 to 8.

The 130 lift operators that make up the Multnomah County bargaining unit voted late last year to reject the company's offer and to authorize a strike.

The union has been bargaining both contracts simultaneously.

Technically, Multnomah County lift drivers have never had a collective bargaining agreement with First Transit. The company assumed the contract of the previous lift service provider — MV Transportation. TriMet replaced MV in 2009, but before the ink was

(Turn to Page 6)



About 75 members and allies of ATU Local 757 picket in front of TriMet's main office in Southeast Portland May 9 during a one-day strike by lift operators who work for First Transit Inc. The action moved the foreign-based company to return the bargaining table, where a tentative agreement was reached May 12.

City of Portland sitting on \$120 million stash

BY DON McINTOSH
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

When union Business Manager Richard "Buz" Beetle learned late last year that the City of Portland might lay off workers in road maintenance, he wanted to know: Could the cuts be avoided by tapping reserves? Beetle's union, 850-member Laborers Local 483, represents several hundred City of Portland employees who work on roads, parks and sewage treatment, and scores of their jobs were on the line.

Beetle knows labor law, but he's no accountant. To look at City finances, he hired economist Peter Donohue. Donohue's findings took the union by surprise.

The City of Portland, with an annual budget of about \$500 million, was publicly proposing to curtail street cleaning, close park restrooms and community centers, and lay off 100 workers, in response to a \$14 million to \$28 mil-

lion budget shortfall — all while sitting on a \$120.6 million unrestricted fund balance and a \$50 million general fund reserve.

Donohue, who's analyzed public employer finances for dozens of unions, calls City budget documents fantasy fiction. So instead of studying budgets, he spends his time looking at the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR), an independently audited document that bondholders, bond underwriters, and bond rating agencies use to assess a public agency's financial position. Donohue scoured 10 years of the reports for Portland, and found steadily growing balances in the city's eight "Internal Service Funds."

Internal service funds are a way to account for centrally purchased goods and services, and to spread out administrative costs among City bureaus. The way it works, the City charges each bureau for facilities, vehicles, printing, technology, insurance, and human resources services that the bureau uses. So in any given year, Donohue explains, what the bureaus pay and what the City spends to provide those services should be about the same, and the internal service fund balances, which are managed by the City's Office of Management and Finance (OMF) should tend to zero out.

But in Portland's CAFRs, internal service fund balances have been rising. In the last six years, the City's Technology Services fund, for example, took in \$36 million more than it spent, leaving \$38.9 million in "unrestricted net assets" as of June 30, 2011. The Facilities Services Operating fund took in \$11.6 million more than it spent over that same time period, leaving a balance of \$23.3 million. All told, the eight internal service funds totaled \$120.6 million last June, having grown \$54.6 million in six years.

Armed with that information, members of Local 483 began to make the obvious point, in City budget hearings and council sessions: During a budget crisis, isn't it better to draw down internal fund balances than to halt street paving, terminate trash pickup in parks, and eliminate the Dutch Elm Tree disease program?

The union wrote a letter to City

(Turn to Page 6)

Baby steps to restoring shop classes

Two union training centers partner with Oregon high schools to revitalize career and technical education

BY DON McINTOSH
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Shop class may soon have a mini-revival in Oregon.

Up to 21 high schools will have new or expanded "career and technical education" classes this fall — from carpentry to digital design, engineering to sports medicine — thanks to start-up grant funds the Legislature approved last year.

Oregon Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian, who originated the bill, told the Labor Press he's been bothered by the disappearance of shop classes from Oregon high schools over the last two decades. The programs, which used to be known as vocational education, introduce young people to skilled trades and offer a real-world application of math and science learning.

Avakian, who graduated from Aloha High School in 1979, said public schools back then had what would today be considered pre-apprenticeship training programs.

"At my middle school, Mountain View Middle School in Beaverton, we built a house every year and sold it," Avakian said. "It was a real house that a family could live in. And the auto shop ... the doors opened every morning and people from the community brought their cars in to be worked on. It was a real apprenticeship-type training system, and we let it slip through our fingers."

Tom Thompson, an expert on career and technical education at the Oregon Department of Education, says programs like that have dropped by about a third just in the last decade. Ten years ago there were about 80 high school automotive programs in Oregon; now there are 40. And only 12 Oregon high schools today offer classes in construction.

So in 2011, Avakian asked state lawmakers for \$4 million in grant funds to revitalize high school career and technical education. None opposed the idea,

and roughly half signed on as co-sponsors. They approved \$2 million.

Word went out that the start-up money would be available to school districts that committed to continue the programs, especially those which partnered with business, labor and community groups. Avakian and Oregon Superintendent of Education Susan Castillo appointed a 25-person committee to evaluate grant applications, and school districts lined up to apply for the funds.

In April, the committee judged 43 grant proposals, totaling \$11 million in requests. In the end they divided the available \$2 million among eight proposals. The largest grant — \$435,290 — goes to a program in Linn County that will partner with union training centers.

Known as the Linn County Regional Trades Academy, that program will combine an existing welding and construction program at Lebanon High School with the machine tool and automotive program at South Albany High School and the carpentry program at

(Turn to Page 7)