

...CWA working with Portland cabbies to start own company

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proto-union, the group pools funds from members to help when drivers get sick or have an accident.

Then Wako heard from a friend in Denver about a group of taxi drivers who formed their own cab company with the help of a union, Communications Workers of America (CWA). In recent years, CWA-affiliated companies have formed in Alexandria, Virginia; Madison, Wisconsin; and Phoenix, Arizona. In New York City, a National Taxi Workers Alliance formed and last year became the latest union to affiliate with the national AFL-CIO.

CWA, once known as the phone company union, has been decimated by wave after wave of deregulation and outsourcing, and has lately broadened its reach. Portland Local 7901 has taken in salon workers, techies, and phone canvassers. Why not taxi drivers?

Courts have ruled that cab drivers — when they are classified as independent contractors — don't have the legal right to form a union under the National Labor Relations Act passed in 1935. But as unionists knew before 1935, workers can unionize whether the law recognizes it or not. Portland's taxi drivers had already gone on strike. They were already paying their own voluntary dues. Now Wako and other drivers resolved to affiliate with CWA and become part of the labor movement.

At first, the union effort was entirely underground. GPS devices in Broadway cabs would tip off management if all of a sudden a dozen or more taxis converged on the parking lot outside the



Kedir Wako holds a union card showing membership in CWA Local 7901. Wako, who works 14-hour days driving for Broadway Cab, wants City approval for a new union-affiliated cab company that would enable drivers to make a better life.

union hall. So Wako and his fellow drivers carpooled, and parked in different spots, blocks away from the union hall.

They put together a proposal to form a new driver-owned company, modeled on the Denver co-op. The proposed Union Cab Co. would offer health insurance, charge lower dispatch fees, and allow drivers to work more reasonable hours.

Wako and several other drivers filed papers of incorporation. And they made a formal application for 50 new vehicle permits to the Private For-Hire Transportation Review Board. That Board considers applications and makes recommendations, but no new permits can be issued without City Council ap-

proval. So Wako and Local 7901 President Madelyn Elder, joined by Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain, met with Mayor Adams on Feb. 4, 2011. They explained their proposal, but also told the mayor about their worry that drivers would be fired for trying to organize a competing company. Adams was direct: If any drivers are fired, he wants to hear about it.

"Sam Adams — he's our hero,"

Wako says. "If the cab companies try to retaliate because [we came to his office], the mayor's not gonna tolerate it."

Adams also promised that the City would study taxi driver working conditions. Eleven months later, the City's exhaustively researched report confirmed what Wako told him — and sets the stage for reform.

City administrators are working on a proposal, though Kathleen Butler, regulatory manager at the City Department of Revenue wouldn't give specifics. There are many possibilities:

- The City could simply regulate the kitty, declaring a maximum amount or requiring companies to justify the charges.

- The City could change the way permits are given out, and/or reshuffle who gets them. Year after year, the same companies have gotten the same number of permits, but the City has no legal obligation to continue that, and there's no inherent logic to the current distribution. The City could decide to strip Broadway or other companies of permits, or it could move to a point system which gives preference to companies where drivers make a living wage.

- The City could issue vehicle permits to drivers, not companies; then drivers could choose which companies to affiliate based on which offered the fairest terms. That's what Red Diamond

— taxi drivers' elected driver representative on the Private For-Hire Transportation Review Board — is proposing.

- Or the City could give Wako and his fellow drivers a shot at forming a second cab co-op. No additional permits have been granted since 1998, and most drivers interviewed by the City were concerned that issuing new permits would dilute the market and thus reduce driver earnings. But again, nothing prevents the City from withdrawing permits from existing companies.

Whatever the City administrators propose is likely to air at the July meeting of the Private For-Hire Transportation Review Board, which has not been scheduled yet.

"We're not gonna give up now," Wako said. "We want to liberate ourselves."

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...CWA union activist fired

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fundraising "ultimatum" by \$47. She said in nine years at the call center she has missed only one quota, and twice has been recognized as "caller of the year." However, since she became active in the union last October, she has received five warnings for not meeting her quota and recently was placed on probation.

Robinson and other workers say their call center has seen a shuffling of donor contact lists, with Portland getting new lists that were less lucrative. Robinson's termination also coincided with two bargaining sessions held earlier in the week that didn't go well.

CWA Local 7901 Union Representative Joe Crane said following a slow start, negotiations had actually started to progress, though the employer still would meet only two days a month, and for only two to three hours at a time. Crane and Robinson said talks

held Tuesday and Wednesday, June 26-27, digressed and at times became heated. The following day, Robinson was terminated.



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