

At TriMet Lift, contracted bus drivers say they want a union

It's not every day workers get to swarm their manager's office to demand union recognition. But that's what a group of TriMet Lift workers did Oct. 3, accompanied by a state senator, the Oregon AFL-CIO president, and the president of the union they want to join.

The employer is First Transit — a division of the giant UK-based multinational First Group. Under contracts with TriMet, First Transit runs TriMet Lift, a transit service for seniors and the disabled, from three Portland-area locations. At two of the locations, workers are represented by Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757, but at the SE 92nd and Powell yard, they're

nonunion. Up to now, anyway.

Workers weren't surprised when First Transit operations manager Linda Ciavara, caught off guard, wouldn't say whether the company will voluntarily recognize their choice to unionize. So the next morning, union supporters filed a petition with the National Labor Relations Board. The federal agency has scheduled an election for Nov. 7 to determine if workers really want a union. [The fact that 112 of the 166 workers might have signed union authorization cards isn't enough to demonstrate their choice to join a union under U.S. labor law; the employer first gets a chance to hire union avoidance consultants and go at workers at mandatory meetings.]

But on Oct. 3, at least, spirits were high as workers felt the power of the union. State Senator Laurie Monnes-Anderson was there to lend moral support, as was Oregon AFL-CIO chief Tom Chamberlain and Bruce Hansen — a 20-year TriMet driver who became Local 757 president earlier this year.

Hansen said unionizing the third TriMet Lift unit is a top priority for Local 757, and was something he campaigned on.

Pay, benefits, and fair treatment are among the reasons First Transit workers cite for unionizing, as well as the security of knowing what the rules are — and that they apply to everyone equally.

"The rules are there but you're not



Paratransit drivers celebrate after making a demand for union recognition with Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757. They'll vote Nov. 7.

sure what they are," said driver Mary Williams, "and they're implemented one way for some people and another way for other people."

First Transit workers at TriMet Lift's two unionized locations have separate collective bargaining agreements, but in both cases, they out-earn their counter-

parts at the non-union location, the union says. Hourly wages at the 92nd Avenue yard top out at \$18.75, compared to over \$21 at the two union yards. The union workers also have holiday bonuses, paid sick days, the right to a representation during discipline, and a grievance procedure, all of which

the nonunion workers lack.

Matt Leist — who's worked at the 92nd Avenue yard for 18 years as a driver, road supervisor, and trainer — said the question of whether to unionize has come up again and again. What made the difference this time, Leist said, was support from the wider union movement.

As part of an Oregon AFL-CIO pilot project, affiliated unions pool resources, and lend staff organizers when a workplace unionizing campaign is ready to snowball. In this case, full-time union organizers paired up with First Transit drivers and visited their co-workers. In the course of a three-week blitz, union support grew from the initial 20-person committee to 112 workers having signed union cards.

"This is a career; it's not just a driving job," said driver Roni White. "Having a union, and benefits, supports that."

Oregon ETA honors Burns at awards dinner



VICKIE BURNS

Vickie Burns, executive director of Labor's Community Service Agency, received a "Commitment In Action" award from the Oregon Employment & Training Association.

The annual award is presented to an individual who, through service and leadership, has demonstrated commitment in action and excellence in the field of workforce development.

As part of her job at Labor's Community Service Agency, Burns, a member of Office and Professional Employees Local 11, is part of a rapid response team that is called in to assist employees who have been notified of layoff.

The Oregon Employment & Training Association is a network of workforce development professionals, businessmen and women, and supporters from the workforce spectrum.



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