

Unions wary as Portland bargaining begins amid plans for cuts

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

Job security will be the top concern of workers in contract bargaining this year between the City of Portland and the coalition of unions known as the District Council of Trade Unions (DCTU). In one of his first acts after taking office, Mayor Charlie Hales asked each city bureau to prepare scenarios for a 10 percent budget cut. That has union members worried for their jobs.

Hales has said he wants to get back to basics, focusing on core services and cutting out extras. If he follows through, union members who provide the frontline services may have little to fear. But it's bureau managers who will create the budgets, and already, union members are learning of proposed cuts.

Bargaining team member Brooke Brown, for example, learned that her job fingerprinting arrestees as an identification technician in the Portland Police Bureau's forensic evidence division is on the chopping block. Brown is an officer of American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 189, the largest of the seven

unions in the DCTU. The others are Laborers Local 483, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers

(IBEW) Local 48, Machinists Lodge 1005, Operating Engineers Local 701, Painters District Council 5, and

Plumbers and Fitters Local 290. Altogether, the DCTU represents about 1,600 City workers, down 200 from

six years ago. DCTU workers maintain much of the city's infrastructure, including parks, streets, and water and sewer systems. [Other unions — representing fire fighters, police officers, and professional and technical employees — bargain separately.]

"Our priority," said DCTU bargaining team member Michael Darfler, "is to preserve staffing levels, to protect the services citizens have come to expect." Darfler, an electronic technician at Portland's 911 call center, is a member of IBEW Local 48.

Protecting services was the theme of the DCTU's contract kickoff event Feb. 5, dubbed the "Save Our Services" rally. Members and leaders of DCTU unions gathered at noon in a park near City Hall in a show of unity.

"Our message is you need to cut managers, and stop contracting out, before you come to us asking for cuts," said Oregon AFSCME executive director Ken Allen.

The union rally was scheduled for the first day of bargaining, but the City cancelled the first two sessions. Bargaining is now set to begin Feb. 19. The DCTU's current three-year contract expires June 30.



Claire Houston, a wastewater treatment plant operator and member of Laborers Municipal Employees Local 483, takes part in the District Council of Trade Union's "Save Our Services" rally Feb. 5.

Open Letter to Our TriMet Passengers and Community

Over the past several years, TriMet's top management has repeatedly used budget woes as their excuse for raising fares and reducing transit service to this community. Then, they point the finger at the union workforce, blaming the costs of health benefits for workers and retirees. We believe that claim to be false; but, it is difficult to counter an agency spending over \$500,000 each year on PR to spread its version of the truth. **Now, it's time you heard the truth from TriMet's workers.**

We are the people who keep the system running. We watch how this bureaucratic agency works from the inside, we know where its skeletons are buried, and we are saddened by how dysfunctional it has become. Here are the serious consequences of that dysfunction.

TRIMET'S DYSFUNCTION PUTS SAFETY AT RISK. It's not just fatigued drivers, it's also buying new buses with enormous blind spots while forcing train operators to frequently drive without any side vision at all. It's a bus dispatch system programmed to cut off calls after two minutes, even when it's a driver reporting an angry man with a gun. It's buses and rail cars so filthy that they're making operators and passengers sick. And those are just a few of the many serious safety issues we deal with daily.

TRIMET'S DYSFUNCTION PUTS SERVICE QUALITY AT RISK. It's not just the reduced runs, it's also forcing us to issue fare evasion citations when we know fare machines are down. It's making schedules so tight it's impossible to guarantee our passengers will make their connections. It's reducing the number of bus shelters in neighborhoods where we serve the highest number of elderly and disabled passengers.

TRIMET'S DYSFUNCTION PUTS PUBLIC FUNDS AT RISK. It's not just spending millions on new furniture, it's also signing what the *Portland Business Journal* calls "the biggest office lease of the year." It's spending nearly \$2 million dollars giving new buses a "nose job" so they'll look like trains. It's having 161 managers being paid a base wage of over \$75,000 a year, 55 of whom get over \$100,000. This is to supervise a schedule-driven transit system service that can essentially run itself.

TRIMET'S DYSFUNCTION PUTS WORKERS' HEALTH AT RISK. People think our jobs are easy, but the National Institutes of Health and the Department of Labor indicate transit operators become disabled earlier, die younger and get assaulted more than people working in other professions. Studies have called it the most stressful job, resulting in absenteeism, chronic illnesses and high medical costs well into retirement. We have a small pension plan (not PERS), and only a small minority of workers that have retired early with full health coverage.

We are public servants. We are not perfect. Some of us are far from perfect. But we are two thousand people whose work lives are dedicated to providing you with the best service we can. Meanwhile, TriMet's PR department is using your tax money to mislead us all, issue after issue. What we ask is that you consider our viewpoint in the months ahead and evaluate the facts for yourselves.

Sincerely,

THE PEOPLE WHO KEEP PUBLIC TRANSIT ROLLING

 LOOK FOR US
ON FACEBOOK

LEARN MORE AT

 **TRANSITVOICE.ORG**