

GOING FOR BROKE:

TriMet wants a major rewrite of the union contract

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TriMet and Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 757 have been meeting since Sept. 7 to bargain a new contract, but the talks are moving slower than a Portland streetcar. Local 757 President Bruce Hansen says that's because TriMet is proposing loads of concessions — and the union is insisting that managers explain each one.

Members of the public might imagine that a labor negotiation would be a give-and-take, but TriMet is approaching this one as a take-and-take. Hansen said union legal staff counted 453 proposed changes in all, at least 113 of which are substantive. TriMet spokesperson Mary Fetsch offered a different count, saying TriMet has 28 substantive proposals and 27 house-keeping proposals, plus 11 items in the existing contract that it wants deleted — and refuses to bargain over.

Either way, the sheer number of changes TriMet is proposing to the current contract suggests that if there's a contract fight, it's TriMet management that's picking it. If you want to eliminate something that's highly valued by your negotiating partner, you don't simultaneously ask for 27 other things and expect to get a deal. It seems more likely that TriMet's game plan is to roll the dice again, hoping that an arbitrator will deliver what the union refuses to give. State law bars public transit workers in Oregon from striking; instead, if the two sides can't agree on a contract, an arbitrator chooses one side's final offer in its entirety.

That's what happened last time: an arbitrator decided in TriMet's favor. In other words, the contract which TriMet is now proposing myriad changes to is its own final offer from a year ago.

Three months into bargaining, TriMet was still explaining its proposals. Documents related to bargaining — including answers to union questions — now fill two jumbo-sized binders.

Here are two TriMet proposals the union particularly objects to:

• **Stop washing mechanics' dirty overalls.** Even mom-and-pop auto shops provide laundry service for mechanics' overalls, which get filthy with toxic chemicals and require solvents and heavy duty detergents to clean. But TriMet, Oregon's largest transit district, wants to end laundry service. Right now, the union contract requires TriMet to furnish maintenance workers two pairs of laundered overalls per week, with additional pairs for extra-dirty work. TriMet wants to give workers each \$200 a year to buy their own overalls and keep them clean.

• **De-skill the maintenance department.** It takes effort and skill to keep a bus fleet running. City buses weigh 40,000 pounds, and are in constant use. They start and stop much more than other large vehicles, causing extra wear-and-tear to engines and brakes. Heat, defrost, AC and internal lights are often in continuous operation, putting great stress on alternators. Yet TriMet's maintenance department is at the top of its game, achieving a "miles-between-road-call" record that's more than twice the national standard. And its mechanic training program is said to be the envy of other transit districts around the country. Now TriMet proposes to withdraw from the state-certified diesel mechanic apprenticeship training program, and create a lower-skilled classification of bus and rail mechanics to perform routine preventive maintenance for about \$3 an hour less.

But the most repellent item, to the

union, is TriMet's health insurance proposal. Under the current arbitrator-imposed contract, Local 757 members pay an annual deductible of \$150 per individual or \$450 per family, then 10 percent of medical bills up to an out-of-pocket maximum of \$1,500 a year per individual or \$4,500 per family. TriMet wants to double the deductible, increase the annual out-of-pocket max to \$2,300 per individual or \$6,900 per family, and require union members to pay 6 percent of the premium. And those premiums are sky-high, ranging from \$7,618 a year for employee-only Kaiser Permanente coverage to \$28,966 a year to cover an employee, spouse, and children in the Blue Cross Blue Shield network.

Hansen didn't voice any objection to raises of 2 percent, but said the wage issue can't be dealt with separately from the health insurance issue if TriMet wants union members to pay more for their health care.

And there's one more wrinkle. TriMet proposes that the wage increase take place only when the contract takes effect, instead of making it retroactive to when the previous contract expired (Nov. 30, 2012), which was formerly the custom. Such a proposal is essentially punitive, or at the very least a pressure tactic to get the union to settle quickly. In effect, TriMet is saying that it's willing to give union members a 2 percent raise *now*, but will punish members economically for any delay in

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ATU LOCAL 757 PRESIDENT BRUCE HANSEN

reaching agreement. Local 757 delayed bargaining five months when it fought in court for the right of the press and public to observe negotiating sessions (and lost). But TriMet also delayed bargaining for three or four months, saying managers were unavailable because of vacations, medical appointments, and court dates. It's already one year in, and if the two sides end up in binding arbitration again, it could easily be another year before a decision is reached.

The union hasn't yet made any

counterproposal, and it cancelled a bargaining session scheduled for Nov. 14. Hansen said that's because the union was still waiting for TriMet to respond to a request for information about health insurance. Local 757 wants to use the information to see if it can get a better deal than TriMet.

Hansen said he's hopeful the two sides can still reach agreement in normal bargaining, but added that he won't be shocked if they again deadlock and have to submit offers to an arbitrator.

TriMet now hiring

At the Nov. 13 TriMet board meeting, general manager Neil McFarlane announced that the transit agency plans to hire 78 new bus drivers by March 2. Sixteen drivers were slated to be hired Dec. 2, and an equivalent number will be hired about every three weeks thereafter.

Driver wages start at \$14.73 and bump up in stages until they reach top pay of \$26.76 an hour after 35 months. Drivers also get: paid sick leave, holidays, and vacation; full-family medical, vision, and dental insurance and prescription drug coverage; a pension after 10 years; and a measure of job security thanks to Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757, which ensures that employees have representation in cases of discipline.

All drivers start as part-time "mini-run operators," working split shifts Monday through Friday during morning and evening rush hour. Shifts typically start as early as 5 or 6 a.m. and end after morning rush hour. Drivers then return around 3 p.m. and work until 6 or 7 p.m. Some mini-run operators work Saturday and Sunday, typically straight runs, with one other day during the week, a straight or split shift.

When regular full-time slots open up, the mini-run operators have the opportunity to become full-time. Currently it takes about six months before operators can go full time.

TriMet gives veterans preference points when hiring.

Applicants must have a safe driving record and a valid driver's license for at least five years, and must be able to secure an Oregon or Washington Class "B" commercial driver's license with "P" endorsement. Applicants must also pass a post-offer physical exam and drug test.

To apply, go online to trimet.org/careers.

THE COST OF WATER

Canvassers are out in the City of Portland asking if you think your water costs too much — and asking you to sign a petition to put a measure on the ballot that would create a separate water commission. Sometimes things that sound too good to be true are.

Here are the facts:

- No one can guarantee this new system would lower our water rates — in fact most cities who privatize their water find that rates go up — on average by 50% — over time.
- This campaign isn't funded by concerned citizens. It's funded by a few corporations who are interested in controlling our water and sewer system.
- The new system would privatize our water supply — and lead to a loss of 800 union jobs.
- A City-run water supply means we know exactly who to hold accountable if we disagree with water bureau decisions — we shouldn't give that up.

That's why the Northwest Oregon Labor Council voted to work to stop this ballot measure, and it's why union members should

DECLINE TO SIGN

If you're asked to support a measure to "lower your water bill."