

# Longtime CWA #7901 president Madelyn Elder retiring



MADELYN ELDER

By DON McINTOSH  
Associate Editor

Labor union fighter Madelyn Elder, 60, is stepping down after 21 years in office at Portland-headquartered Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 7901. Elder served five three-year terms as president, following two three-year terms as secretary-treasurer.

She'll be succeeded by Jeanette Turner, Local 7901's current executive vice president, who was running unopposed when nominations closed Oct. 29.

CWA Local 7901 represents workers in telecommunications and at a handful of nonprofit organizations.

In the 15 years Elder served as president, Local 7901 membership plummeted from 1,800 to less than 800 as the local faced round after round of layoffs and closures. Membership would be even smaller today if it weren't for several organizing wins, including about 300 workers at 19 AT&T retail stores. The union's core land-line business — which once provided good union jobs to thousands of CWA members in the Portland area — today employs 175.

In recent years, Elder led hard-fought campaigns to unionize and secure union contracts at some non-traditional employers for CWA, including the computer recycling nonprofit Free Geek, the canvass or-

ganization Grassroots Strategies Inc., and community radio station KBOO-FM. She also helped a group of Portland taxi drivers overcome hurdles to form a union-affiliated co-op, Union Cab. And she fought for more than two years to get a bare-bones contract for 24 workers at a Fund for the Public Interest call center, which raises funds for state PIRGs. Elder also had her share of outright losses. In 2010, she answered a call for help from exploited mistreated workers at Doshia, a local chain of Aveda-branded salons. Workers voted to unionize with CWA, but 17 months later, unable to get a union contract, the union walked away. As Local 7901 membership shrunk, Elder went down to part-time at Local 7901. Since 2010, she's also worked part-time at Oregon Tradeswomen Inc., a non-profit that recruits women to pursue careers in traditionally-male building trades.

Elder will stay through the end of the year to train her replacement.

Turner, 37, grew up in Antioch, California, and is the granddaughter of a union carpenter and a "Rosie the Riveter." She joined CWA in 2006 when she went to work for



JEANETTE TURNER

an AT&T call center in Portland. AT&T was her first union job, after a succession of low-wage employers like Burger King, Motel 6, and Best Western. She got involved in the union as a steward, but soon aroused management's ire. Fired at AT&T, she went to work for the union, and was later reinstated at AT&T on condition she not return to work. But AT&T closed the call center.

As president, Turner says her priority will be training stewards, and getting members to become active— particularly younger workers at AT&T retail stores. She'll also learn to bargain contracts for the first time for several of the local's non-profit bargaining units.

Also running unopposed for Local 7901 office are SEIU Local 503 organizer Joye Camacho, secretary-treasurer, and CenturyLink employee Jeff Hall, executive vice president. Local 7901's new officers will be sworn in at the union's Dec. 11 general membership meeting, and will take office Jan. 1.

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