

CITY OF PORTLAND

911 in turmoil as union contract goes to arbitration

AFSCME Local 189 has given up trying to get the City of Portland to agree on a new union contract for 911 call-takers. Instead, the two sides will submit their final offers to an arbitrator. And it could be six months or more before Employment Relations Board arbitrator Paul Roose even considers the case, because the City is asking that he schedule two full weeks to hear both sides, says union rep Rob Wheaton.

Wheaton describes a state of crisis at the city's Bureau of Emergency Communications (BOEC), due to severe understaffing: BOEC is budgeted for up to 120 positions, but only has about 70 employees. That means daily forced overtime,



Queue	Calls	Agents	L C W
9-1-1	7	6	00:23:26
Non Emer	10	3	00:41:49

Call Control

Hold Not Ready Release

These photos taken by a 911 worker are of the "hold clock" showing the longest current hold time. The 24 minute hold took place on Aug. 11 at 6 p.m. One call that came in at that time was about a distressed swimmer; by the time first responders arrived it was a body recovery.

and sometimes, dangerous call wait times. On the call floor, a time clock visible to all dispatchers displays the longest

current time a caller has been on hold. At about 6 p.m. Aug. 11, it reached 24 minutes.

"BOEC is not a place where

you can improve retention by throwing in beer taps and ping pong tables." Wheaton said. Wheaton argues they need to raise wages to attract more people to what is a very tough job psychologically.

"The city's response is, 'We can't afford it,'" Wheaton said.

Under the old contract, which expired June 30, wages start at about \$21.70 for trainees and rise to over \$36 an hour for senior dispatchers.

Those might sound like good wages, but they're not attracting enough applicants, or retaining enough of those who go through the training. And understaffing makes for overwork, which makes it harder for BOEC to re-

tain workers. It's a vicious cycle.

"People there work years without a weekend off or daylight hours," says Local 189 President Mark Gipson.

Wheaton says the City acknowledges there's a problem, and its most recent proposal takes some steps to address it. But he says it still falls short of what's needed, and the two sides were far apart when the union formally declared impasse.

State law says 911 operators can't strike, so when union negotiations break down, an arbitrator hears arguments from both sides and picks whichever side's offer is most reasonable.

"We think we have a good case," says Wheaton.

Nabisco union standoff leads to wave of retirements

As a union stalemate at Nabisco drags out, senior employees are retiring in significant numbers.

Nabisco's union contract with Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTGM) expired Feb. 29, creating great uncertainty for 2,000 workers in five states, including about 180 at a Nabisco plant in Portland. The two sides haven't met to negotiate since April 8, when Nabisco parent company Mondelez presented the union with what it called its "Revised Last, Best and Final Offer." In

that offer, Mondelez proposed to diminish health insurance coverage and withdraw from the union pension plan, instead contributing the same amount to a 401(k)-style defined contribution plan.

BCTGM called the company's proposal unacceptable.

Union members authorized a strike, and the company has advertised for replacement workers, but neither side has initiated a work stoppage. No negotiations are scheduled. It's a standoff.

But Ron Baker, BCTGM International Strategic Campaign Coordinator, says many Nabisco workers aren't waiting to see how it turns out. Since Mondelez began pushing to leave the pension, close to 100 workers have retired from the Chicago plant, and about 45 from the Portland plant. And some were in a rush to leave by Aug. 1; after that date, workers' monthly pension benefit drops from \$1,900 down to \$1,600 under a pension plan rule that ended the early-retirement 80-and-out benefit 180 days after a union contract's expiration.

"There are skills going out the door that they can never re-

place," Baker said.

Mondelez says it wants out of the BCTGM's multi-employer pension because the plan is headed for insolvency. The plan's financial health took a big hit when Hostess stopped paying into it, in violation of its union contract, then declared bankruptcy and repudiated its \$944 million debt to the pension plan. To deal with the pension plan asset shortfall, remaining employers are having to pay a surcharge equal to 5 or 10 percent of what they were previously paying into the pension.

As the standoff drags on, BCTGM is focused on publicizing its boycott of Nabisco prod-

ucts made in Mexico. After shifting some production to a new facility in Salinas, Mexico, the company laid off 294 of its Chicago workers in March and May. The union is asking consumers to read the label, and if it says Made in Mexico, don't buy it. U.S.-made Nabisco products are still made by union workers.

BCTGM is also reaching out to Mondelez unions in other countries. An international conference of Mondelez unions is scheduled to take place in Chicago Sept. 20-21, organized by International Union of Food Workers (IUF), a world-wide federation of trade unions.



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At Volunteers of America, alcohol and drug treatment workers are ready for a union

Sixty-three workers employed by Volunteers of America (VOA) Oregon will vote next month whether to unionize with Oregon AFSCME.

The workers staff a pair of inpatient residential alcohol and drug treatment facilities in Portland where addicts undergo six months of court-ordered treatment for addiction—a 52-bed facility for men and a 35-bed facility for women.

"They're the front-line caregivers for folks that are in great

need," says union organizer Corey Nicholson. "They deserve a livable wage and respect."

Right now VOA pays residential counselors \$10 to \$12 an hour—barely above the minimum wage, which is now \$9.75 for the Portland area. Some workers have had no raise in years, and some salaried employees complain of unpaid overtime.

"No one should be making \$10 an hour doing the kind of

challenging work we do," says Henry Lauer, an administrative coordinator at the men's residential center.

Lauer and Nicholson say many employees are former addicts themselves and are deeply committed to their work. But workers haven't felt like they're listened to by management. And high case loads and too-high turnover mean less time with clients.

"When conditions of employ-