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## ...UNDER THE BRIDGE

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A salt is a worker who takes a job as the agent of a union. Salts document management misdeeds, educate co-workers about their rights, and even take part in union organizing campaigns.

In this case, Rubi was sent in by Painters and Allied Trades District Council 5 on suspicion that something wasn't right on the Ross Island Bridge repainting project. It's a complicated three-year deal that involves the construction of temporary support structures and containment systems underneath the bridge in order to safely sandblast and repaint three steel arch spans that have aged and rusted since they were last painted in the 1960s.

The Ross Island Bridge spans the Willamette River, connecting U.S. Route 26 between southwest and southeast Portland. In 1976, ownership was transferred from Multnomah County to the state.

Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) estimated that bids would come in at \$30 to \$40 million. But nonunion Abhe & Svoboda of Minnesota won the contract with a low bid of \$22.3 million — \$11 million below the union-signatory contrac-

"When it's go, go, go sometimes people don't pay attention. ... Traditionally when you're working in a dangerous environment like that, employers don't usually rush you to get things done because they understand the liability issue."

— Abhe & Svoboda employee Omar Rubi



tor, Hercules Painting of New Castle, Pennsylvania.

The union wanted to know how Abhe & Svoboda could bid so low, even though they're required to pay the same hourly wage and benefits as their union competitor, under the state "little Davis-Bacon" law, which requires contractors on government construction projects to pay the prevailing wage. Could they be cutting corners to make the project pencil out? Rubi got a job there to find out, and soon found problems.

Paint in some cases was being applied at the wrong thickness or in conditions that were too cold or humid to meet manufacturer specifications, Rubi said. In places, paint was bubbling or chipping, or missing required "striping" along joints.

workers and supervisors, Rubi says.

Rubi, a native Spanish speaker, arrived at work on Election Day to find his locker defaced with obscene images and the words "Trump 16." A supervisor told him, on threat of firing, not to talk to a female African-American co-worker who had complained of extreme sexual harassment.

Meanwhile, Oldham did some research, and found violations and fines on numerous Abhe & Svoboda bridge projects. Some examples:

- Connecticut, 2007 — \$1.3 million in unpaid wages for paying painters at the wage for laborers and carpenters
- Astoria, Oregon, 2011 — Nearly \$30,000 in penalties for dozens of OSHA violations
- Hawaii, 2012 — \$15,500 in penalties for three serious OSHA violations
- Fresno County, California, 2013 — \$90,900 in civil penalties for failure to employ apprentices as required
- Mendocino County, California, 2016 — \$60,000 in back wages and \$55,000 in penalties for prevailing wage violations

And this wasn't even the first time Abhe & Svoboda had been scrutinized by Portland-area unions. In 1998, when Abhe &

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