

...Plasterers

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needed funds the most.

“The actuaries called it a perfect storm,” says Trudy Horn, president of the Masonry Industry Trust Administration (MITA). Based in Portland, MITA administers benefit funds for the trowel trades, including Operative Plasterers and Cement Masons and Bricklayers and Allied Crafts.

Trustees took swift action to slow the bleeding — eliminating death benefits and subsidized early retirement benefits, cutting the benefit accrual rate, and increasing employer contribution rates. But because of the continued recession, it wasn't enough: The plan's funding level continued to decline, reaching 47 percent by 2017. Today, it continues to earn respectable investment returns on its roughly \$20 million in assets, but must draw down those assets in order to pay over \$2 million in benefits a year.

In late 2014, Congress passed the Multiemployer Pension Reform Act (MPRA), a law allowing pension trustees to save plans from insolvency by reducing benefits up to a certain amount. With actuaries projecting the Plasterers Local 82 Pension Plan would be insolvent in 16 years, Plasterers Local 82 and its 17 contributing employers in the Associated Wall and Ceiling Contractors of Ore-

gon and Southwest Washington decided to pursue that option, and worked together to craft a solution members could live with.

They proposed a 22 percent reduction for active participants, and 31 percent for all others, including inactive workers and retirees already drawing a pension. [Except that under MPRA, pension benefits can't be cut at all for those 80 and older, and cuts phase out for those between 75 and 80.] Trustees made the cuts deeper for retirees in part for reasons of equity: It wouldn't be fair to expect current workers to contribute more to fund more generous benefits than they'll ever receive.

The U.S. Treasury Department approved the cuts proposal Nov. 8, and sent ballots to all participants Nov. 21. The vote was 42 in favor of the cut, and 48 against, but under MPRA, trustee cut proposals are implemented unless a majority of participants vote to reject them. Sickles said a number of members told him they were voting yes by not casting ballots. The cuts now will take effect Feb. 1.

MITA bookkeeper Kirt Haneberg called the cuts both tragic and necessary, but said there are reasons for optimism. Construction continues to boom, and work hours are up, which benefits the pension plan's bottom line. And there are signs Local 82 is improving its market share: Its international union has

lately assigned organizers to support efforts to bring in non-union workers and contractors.

“I'm hoping it's a corner that we're turning,” Haneberg told the Labor Press.

Could benefits be restored?

The pension cuts take effect Feb. 1, but if the pension plan's finances improve enough in the coming years — through a combination of exceptional investment returns and increased work hours by active members — trustees would be able to backfill some of the lost benefits. In fact, the rules would require them to.

There's also a possibility that Congress could act to restore benefits. Last year, Congress created a special bipartisan committee to look at solutions for the roughly 1 in 10 union-sponsored multi-employer plans that are headed for insolvency. The committee held hearings in the summer of 2018, but failed in its mandate to come up a proposed solution by the end of November. However, committee members did leak a draft of the proposal they were working on. Among the details: The federal government would lend money to distressed pension plans — including ones that had already made MPRA cuts — to allow them to invest their way back to financial health. Proposals like that are expected to resurface in bills introduced in the new Congress that began Jan. 3.

UNIONIZATION → NOV-DEC 2018

The following are Oregon and Southwest Washington workplaces where workers have decided whether to be represented by a union. The thumbs-up symbol means workers will be union-represented. Thumbs-down means they'll be on their own. The information comes from the National Labor Relations Board and the Oregon Employment Relations Board.

Union election results

Employer (Location) Union	Yes-No	
Rodda Paint (Portland) Painters Local 1094 ■ 10 warehouse employees	7-3	👍
Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare (Portland) Oregon AFSCME ■ 50 crisis counselors, nurse practitioners and others at the 1825 NE Glisan St. location	32-0	👍
Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare (Portland) Oregon AFSCME ■ 8 counselors and administrative workers at the 310 NW Flanders St. location	8-0	👍
Total Traffic & Weather Network (Tigard) SAG-AFTRA ■ 2 traffic editors/announcers	2-0	👍
Burgerville (Portland) Industrial Workers of the World ■ 22 crew members at the company's 1122 SE Hawthorne location	13-9	👍
Providence Portland Medical Center (Portland) SEIU Local 49 ■ 838 non-professional support workers, including cooks, housekeepers, and CNAs	374-376	👎
Tube-Art Displays (Milwaukie) IBEW Local 48 ■ 8 outside servicemen and installers	7-1	👍

National AFL-CIO to celebrate MLK Day

“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there 'is' such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.”

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr

Hundreds of social justice professionals, activists, and community leaders will meet in Washington, D.C., Jan. 20 for the 2019 AFL-CIO Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Civil and Human Rights Conference. There, they will celebrate the legacy and dream of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and call on all working people to rise up with courage and conviction in a demand for economic and racial justice.

In Dr. King's famous 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom speech, he told a divided nation that we need one another and that we are stronger when we march forward, together. Now, more than 50 years later in these trying times, his words still ring true. We are in the midst of great political and social unrest. We have witnessed devastating rollbacks and attacks on our rights in recent years. But we have an opportunity to come together, lift up one another and strategize collectively for the future of our dreams.

Steelworkers, IBEW launch union drive at Tesla plant

BUFFALO, NY (PAI)— Responding to worker contacts, United Steelworkers and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) have launched a joint organizing drive at the Tesla “green jobs” solar panel plant in Buffalo, New York.

The campaign, which started last month, aims to organize approximately 400 production and maintenance workers at the plant, a former Steelworker-represented Republic Steel factory. The plant is now part of a state initiative to bring high-tech factory jobs to the area.

“The only way we can ensure we have a voice in the company and have equal rights across the board is with a union contract,” Aaron Nicpon, a member of the

internal organizing committee, said. “We want to have a voice at Tesla so we can have a better future for ourselves and our families.”

Added fellow member Rob Walsh: “I wanted to work at Tesla because I wanted a job in green energy, a job that can change the world. But I also want a fair wage for my work.”

“We're committed to the continuing success of this facility, and to making sure that Tesla's highly-skilled work force has good, family-sustaining jobs,” said Steelworkers District 4 Director John Shinn.

The Steelworkers and IBEW are partnering with the “Clean Air Coalition of Western New York and the Coalition of Economic Justice.



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