

# NORTHWEST LABOR PRESS

(International Standard Serial Number 0894-444X)

Established in 1900 in Portland, Oregon as a voice of the labor movement. Published on a semi-monthly basis on the first and third Fridays of each month by the Oregon Labor Press Publishing Co. Inc., a non-profit mutual benefit corporation owned by 20 unions and councils including the Oregon AFL-CIO. Serving more than 120 union organizations in Oregon and Southwest Washington.

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Printed on recycled paper, using soy-based inks, by members of Teamsters Local 747-M.

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# Transit ridership plummets, and cleaners work overtime

Mass transit is getting a lot less “mass” since COVID-19 began keeping millions of students and workers at home. For the first time in its 50-year history, Portland-area transit agency TriMet is calling on the public to take transit only if necessary, and asks those who ride to maintain six feet of distance from other riders and the operator.

TriMet buses board only at the front, so passengers must briefly pass within six feet of operators, but that’s not thought to be especially risky as long as passengers don’t stay in the driver area or try to engage drivers in conversation. Nearly half of TriMet’s buses have plexiglass safety panels that can be closed to offer drivers greater protection from exposure, and the agency is prioritizing use of those buses. Drivers have been given hand sanitizer, but the agency hasn’t been able to procure disinfectant wipes.

Meanwhile, many TriMet cleaners have been working 20 to 30 hours a week of overtime: Each night, members of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 757 who work in maintenance are wiping disinfectant on all frequently touched surfaces



Members of ATU Local 757 wear masks as they disinfect TriMet light rail cars.

in all buses and trains—including railings, straps, doors, exit buttons, seats, and all parts of operator cabins. [TriMet made a video of the new cleaning protocol here.] During the day, maintenance crews are also wiping frequently touched surfaces at rail stations and transit centers.

Local 757 officer Kevin Kinoshita—who works in the maintenance division at

TriMet’s Center garage—says the enhanced cleaning was helped greatly by the just-in-time arrival of nine new fogger machines that spray a mist of hydrogen peroxide solution in vehicles. The mist touches every surface, and is then removed with fans and the vehicles’ HVAC systems.

TriMet ridership is down nearly half since the crisis began, from an estimated 1.9 mil-

lion bus and light rail boardings a week in February to 1 million boardings the week of March 15-21.

Fares make up about half of TriMet’s revenue, and a regional payroll tax makes up the other half; both sources of revenue are plummeting in the crisis, but emergency aid to transit agencies is in several COVID-19 relief bills Congress is considering. TriMet spokesperson Roberta Alstadt told the Labor Press there are currently no plans for layoffs.

But if you want a model for crisis response by a transit agency, look elsewhere in Oregon, said Local 757 vice president Jon Hunt, who’s been working from home since the union office shut down March 16. To keep drivers safe, Salem’s Cherriot transit agency and Lane Transit District in Eugene-Springfield made all buses fare-free, directed passengers to board through the back door unless the wheelchair ramp is needed, and sent drivers who are over 65 home on paid administrative leave (older people are at greater risk if infected by the coronavirus.)

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