COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Transit union reaches deal with TriMet

As arbitration neared, management dropped its proposal to eliminate apprenticeship.

"No, this is NOT an April fools joke!" said Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757 in an April 1 Facebook post announcing a tentative agreement covering 2,640 TriMet employees had been reached at 12:30 a.m. that morning. "It has been adversarial, it has been tiring, but at the end, the parties were both able to put our members and the public first."

To reach a deal, TriMet dropped its proposal to eliminate its state-certified apprenticeship program for bus mechanics. Local 757 fought for over a year to save the apprentice program, and got support from Oregon Labor Commissioner Val Hoyle, Congresswoman Suzanne Bonamici, U.S. Senators Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden, and others.

Meanwhile, the union agreed to a number of changes in the bus mechanic and other training programs. A program that gave bus cleaners the chance to enroll in the bus mechanic apprenticeship is being replaced by a new program to pay for up to 15 employees per term to take classes at Portland Community College on their own time. Over a three year period, employees can enroll in up to six classes, as many as two classes per term, to prepare them to qualify for jobs in facilities maintenance, rail equipment maintenance or maintenance of way, and the contract spells out hiring preferences for internal candidates.

When TriMet was seeking to wind down its apprenticeship program, it stopped adding apprentices to the program. The agency seems to have acknowledged that deprived bus cleaners and fuelers from opportunities to advance.

Now under a separate memorandum of understanding, TriMet will pay $4,000 to over 100 service workers hired from 2014 to 2019 who never had the chance to enter an apprenticeship program.

The agreement also includes front-loaded across-the-board annual raises each Dec. 1; the raises are 3%, 2.5% and 2.25% for 2019, 2020, and 2021 respectively.

Upon ratification, bus operator pay will start at $17.57 an hour and top off at $32.10 an hour after three years. Members will get backpay checks for the raises retroactive to Dec. 1, 2019 and 2020.

Journeyman bus and rail mechanics will get an additional raise of $1 an hour Dec. 1, 2021. Mechanics will get an additional $3-an-hour pay premium while they're training apprentices, up from 25 cents currently.

Members are almost half way through the term of the contract, which runs Dec. 1, 2019 to Nov. 30, 2022.

The contract also allocates $2.2 million to reimburse employees for their increased contribution to Kaiser Permanente health premiums dating back to Jan. 1, 2020. It changes discipline rules so that written warnings and reprimands don't count toward progressive discipline after 18 months, unless the worker has another similar violation in that time. And it increases short term disability benefits from $150 to $300 a week until Jan. 1, 2023, when the Oregon Paid Family and Medical Leave Act takes effect.

The deal was reached 12 days before the two sides were to begin binding arbitration in which an arbitrator would pick one side's offer. ATU's international provided four staff to assist with negotiations.

Members will vote by mail whether to ratify the agreement, with ballots to be counted April 23. The TriMet Board of Directors will vote on the agreement April 28.

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5331 S Macadam Ave, Suite 220
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Visit us at www.BeneSys.com
503-224-0048 | info@benesys.com

UNITY AT UNITY CENTER Under way since 2019, first-contract negotiations between Legacy Health Systems and Oregon Nurses Association (ONA) are going poorly. Nurses at Legacy Emanuel and Good Sam are non-union, but 200 nurses at Legacy's Unity Center for Behavioral Health joined ONA in June 2019. SEIU Local 49, also having trouble getting a fair contract, joined ONA picketing April 7 at Unity and Emanuel hospital.

OFNHP signs first contract at St. Charles Hospital in Bend

Even with the agreement signed, management can't resist taking potshots at the union.

By Don McIntosh

Two weeks after ending their nine-day strike—and more than 18 months after they voted to unionize—a group of 143 medical technologists at St. Charles Medical Center in Bend ratified their first-ever union contract. It reduces pay disparities and locks in current work rules and benefits so the hospital can't change them without workers' say-so. But it also leaves a lot of things to be determined by management, including future wage increases.

Announcing the ratification, Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals (OFNHP) said the contract marks "a new stage of labor peace and partnership with the hospital." But in the hospital's announcement of the ratification, St. Charles goes to pains to imply that workers' decision to unionize and strike was futile, saying workers ended up agreeing to the same wage proposal the hospital made before the strike and that the wage package was no better than what non-union employees receive.

OFNHP spokesperson Shane Burley said the hospital raised wages for all workers, union and non-union, as a result of the strike. Most union contracts either set a flat wage for each job or establish a "step scale" that pays a set amount for each classification depending on how long a worker has been there. The St. Charles contract instead establishes a set of "ranges" for each of 22 separate job classifications, and specifies that employees with 5, 10, and 15 years of experience earn at least the 25th, 50th, 75th percentile of the range, while those with 20 or more years earn the top of the range. New hires are placed in the range based on skill and experience, at the hospital's discretion, but not more than existing workers with equivalent skill and experience. Actual wage rates themselves are in an appendix that's not part of the collective bargaining agreement, "to protect caregiver privacy."

The contract says in the fourth quarter of each year the hospital will review wages for each classification and determine whether "market adjustments" are needed.

St. Charles also bragged that it "held firm" to its insistence that it remain an "open shop," where union dues are voluntary. [New hires, however, have to pay either dues or "fair share" fees covering the costs of representation.]

The contract runs April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2024, and the union committed not to strike or picket during that time.

CONTRACT DETAILS

Cost of living raises Determined by management, at least 0.5% annually.

Shift differentials $1.36/hr swing, $2.93/hr graveyard, $1.80/hr weekends

Standby pay $5/hr

Discipline No discipline without just cause, the right to union representation in disciplinary meetings

Health insurance same benefits and premium share as non-union workers

Retirement match contributions to a 403(b) defined contribution retirement account, up to 6% of payroll