

Service workers union protests US Bank

BY CASSANDRA KOSLEN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

On Friday, March 18, Fair Economy Oregon, a campaign of the SEIU, rallied to protest US Bank and the State of Oregon's distribution of unemployment insurance and child support payments on debit Visa ReliaCards, claiming that the fees the card comes with are unfair and take advantage of those already experiencing poverty.

Rallies were scheduled for between noon and 1 p.m. today at US Banks across the country.

Cardholders face fees after two withdrawals at a US Bank ATM and two teller cash transactions per month, despite that benefits are added on a weekly basis.

"We need to be sensitive to how terrible the economy is and that it is Wall Street and the big banks that caused the problem in the first place," says Maureen Crawford, community organizer with the Service Employees International Union.

ReliaCard is issued through US Bank and was implemented in 2007. The contract is publicly funded, and is one of many in Oregon. According to the Fair Economy Oregon Web site, the state has \$11 billion total in outsourced contracts, and last year alone US Bank awarded \$4.4 billion in company bonuses.

As of March 10, the Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics reported Oregon's unemployment rate at 10.4 percent of the labor force.

"The contract is up for negotiations this year, so this is an opportunity to negotiate a better deal with US Bank or find another vendor," says Crawford.

ReliaCard Visa holders are charged \$1.50 after two ATM withdrawals and \$3 for each teller transaction after two. A \$17 overdraft fee also applies, should the cardholder opt into the offered US Bank overdraft plan for the benefit debit card.

Objectors claim these and other fees are turning what should be a social service into a lucrative taxpayer-funded business deal for the already large corporate bank. Such fees are deemed unfair when they do not apply to standard checking or savings accounts with the bank.

"The state holds billions of dollars of contracts with other entities," adds Crawford. "We think it is important to look at all the contracts."

Even a possible cut of 2-3 percent out of these contracts could help build services with money the state already has, the organization claims.

"US Bank has (similar) contracts with a lot of different states. Out of all the states, the State of Oregon has the worst deal and we think that's wrong in a time when banks are making record profits," says Crawford. "It's not right to take that money from fees from the people who need it the most."

ReliaCard has the Visa signature and may be used to purchase and get cash back from any merchant who accepts Visa. Interlink Merchants who accept Visa can also process the card. There is no fee or limit on purchases made with ReliaCard.

The card may also be used at any non-US Bank ATM bearing the Visa logo, but fees do apply. In addition to \$1.50 posed by US Bank, the cardholder may incur a surcharge from the other ATM owner.

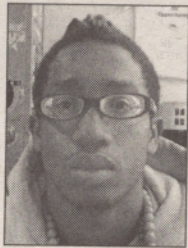
The fees and restrictions ReliaCard Visa presents can be avoided if the person receiving benefits opts instead to have funds go into a personal bank account via direct deposit.

However, "Not everybody has a regular checking account for various reasons, so they might not even have the option (for direct deposit)," Crawford says.

Hard work, high energy means a ticket home

BY KAISA MCCROW
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Dymar Blanton sells Street Roots outside of Voodoo Donuts, a spacious corner on Second Avenue and Burnside, a mini downtown center. Groups of people, mainly tourists and Saturday Market goers, can spend a serious chunk of their Saturday in line for these famous donuts. For Dymar, this means that instead of people coming and going, maybe stopping for a second to buy a Street Roots on their way to the grocery store, he sells to a slowly creeping line of the same hungry, fried-dessert-seeking faces. With a crowd this tough, he has to stay on his game, as people are likely to hear him trying to sell a paper three or more times while they wait. Luckily, Dymar is neither short on energy nor information. He is slight in stature, and wears thick glasses that he has needed since birth. Recently, he spent six months without his glasses, living life on the streets virtually blind, which for most is an unfathomable feat. He circles the periphery of the donut line offering tidbits about the paper, singing songs, and good naturedly heckling people when appropriate.



VENDOR PROFILE Dymar Blanton

"Street Roots, only a dollar. Help the homeless get off the streets and into the community. We have stories, art, and poetry, written by the people, for the people," calls out Dymar. He is the self-proclaimed Most Energetic Vendor, and he says that he never finishes a day of work until he has sold every paper.

He has to. "Only 6 papers left to sell, and I can finally go home, Ain't no nation like a do-nation. Get yourself a Street Roots — it's the new e-dit-tion" he sings to the crowd. No one jumps to buy a paper this time, but maybe they are wondering what he means by, "home." At the end of the night "home" for Dymar is a hostel, but only if he has sold enough papers. Otherwise, it is a shelter.

The path that led Dymar to where he is now is full of loss and abuses. When he was only 6 years old, Dymar's stepfather shot and killed his mother. He makes a motion to explain this, rather than saying it out loud. It seems unreal, so it takes a moment to sink in. After the death of his mother, the remainder of his youth was spent bounced between different homes and family members; often the experiences were traumatic. Dymar spent two years as a young teen living with his biological father, which he says was abusive and horrific from start to finish.

Things reached a breaking point when Dymar began dating a boy at school. Letters passed between the boys were brought to the attention of a school counselor who in turn, told Dymar's father. The result of being outed without his

consent to a homophobic father resulted in one of the worst beatings of his life. At that point, neither him nor his father wanted him to stay, so he left to live with an aunt, and eventually went back with his grandmother, which brought it's own set of challenges.

Despite the intensity with which he is sharing about himself, Dymar cuts himself off to make sure he is approaching each new person in line before a panhandler does. If these folks are going to be in line for a while, they can only be approached once or twice, so Dymar wants to get there first.

After a few more songs to the crowd, Dymar goes back to talking about his teen years. He ended up on the streets after continuing to bounce between living in a group home and at his grandmother's. On the streets he was introduced to heroin. His boyfriend, Stitches, was a user and introduced Dymar to the drug. He overdosed the first time. "Ambulance, hospital, everything," Dymar explains with animation, highlighting the drama of a scenario that he himself does not remember. Citing a lack of familial support after his overdose, Dymar felt that he had no choice but to stay on the streets.

Dymar and Stitches continued their relationship, and worked together to get clean. Stitches gave Dymar an engagement ring. They were in love and Dymar even brought him home for Thanksgiving to meet his grandmother. Only a month later though, four days before Christmas, Stitches died of a drug overdose right in front of Dymar. Dymar makes no move to hide the pain that he still feels over the loss, he says it is with him every moment.

"You don't need to be here, you don't need to be dead yet. Wake up," he hears them say to him. "They've been there protecting me, they are my guardian angels, and I know every day that I'm out here, they are right next to me. I feel their presence."

Dymar is clean now, and he is focused on continuing to stay this way. He works hard and is bent in a positive direction. Still, listening to Dymar talk about his past hits hard, and could soften even the most focused of Voodoo pilgrimagers.

Dymar wants to go back home to see his grandmother soon. He's waiting on a family member's tax return to purchase a bus ticket to her home in Colorado. When he makes the trip, the Voodoo Donuts corner, teeming with life and people, will miss his energetic presence and funny quips. "Anybody have a chair they can give me?" he jokes to the crowd after mentioning how exhausted he is. Then he gets a little more serious, "Or, give me enough money so I can go buy a chair?" Some people laugh now, they are entertained by his sass. What is lost on most of them is the reality of the joke. Dymar isn't looking for a chair, he's out working, for a place to stay, for a meal, for a trip home. "Street Roots, it's only a dollar, folks."

VENDOR WORK ADS

Cassidy Morse: Looking for work. Will do most anything, light and heavy. \$10 an hour, four hour minimum. References supplied. Please call 503-224-5398 or Street Roots at 503-228-5657.

Leave call back number and detailed message: 503-946-3959, or Street Roots, 503-228-5657.

Pete Marshall W. and Julie W.: Pleasant mannered and experienced at labor. Odd jobs. Yard work speciality. Repairing household losses. Pay back huge debts.

Vincent Bartlett: Laborer for hire, any type of work — painting, yardwork, moving, handyman, light or heavy. Honest and dependable. Call Street Roots at 503-228-5657 and leave message for Vincent.



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