

LIFT drivers plan event to address work conditions

Drivers for the paratransit service for Trimet say their contractor, First Transit, isn't responsive to the conditions they work under

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Imagine that you've just arrived at work, and you are immediately informed it is time for your first break. Within the next two hours, you also must take your lunch break and second short break. Now, you have six, maybe seven hours of your shift left — and your breaks are spent.

Now imagine that your job is to drive a 26-foot vehicle, and, despite when your breaks are that day, since it's always different, a dispatcher will inform you when you can take them. And once you are alerted of your break, you have five minutes or two miles to find a place to not only park the 26-footer, but also one that happens to have a public restroom in walking distance.

Now imagine that the bus is full of passengers, some of whom should not be left unattended, according to the Bureau of Labor Industries. Your employer, however, tells you that you can leave them for a short period if the vehicle door is open.

This is what First Transit tells its TriMet LIFT drivers, according to driver and Washington County union liaison Cathy Redwine. First Transit is TriMet's contractor for TriMet LIFT, the Portland Metro Area's paratransit service that transports people with disabilities. Situations like these are disturbingly frequent at LIFT, she said, and are not taken seriously by First Transit.

"First Transit told me last week they think we're making it too big of a deal," Redwine said of the difficulty of finding a place to park in the five minutes or two miles allotted to them once alerted of their break time.

First Transit has begun to gain notoriety for stacking breaks and leaving drivers without breaks for so long that they have soiled themselves, or resorted to wearing adult diapers, among a host of other complaints. In 2017, one driver was fired because she was unable to wait, and relieved herself on the ground outside of the bus.

Drivers' shifts can also be extended without notice, and they can be informed of an upcoming shift the next morning, sometimes with as little as six hours notice — barely time for a full night's sleep that would prepare them to drive safely the next day, said Justin Norton-Kertson of Portland Jobs with Justice.

During a panel last month, drivers, as well as some passengers, shared their

complaints with the Portland Jobs with Justice-affiliated Worker's Rights Board, which has created a list of recommendations they will be sharing at the next TriMet board meeting later this month.

On June 25, passengers of LIFT will have the opportunity to share their experiences at "Speak Out for Accessibility in Public Transit and Housing," an event co-hosted by Portland Jobs with Justice, Real Choice Initiative, and the Amalgamated Transit Union, or ATU 757, which represents Trimet drivers. The event will be 6:30-8 p.m. at SEIU 503, 6401 SE Foster Road in Portland.

For passengers, scheduling issues often leave them on the bus for as long as two to four hours for as short as a 15-minute trip, according to Redwine. Drivers will be given a set route at the beginning of the day in two-hour increments, which can be amended at any time by the dispatcher. However, the routes aren't always logically planned, and riders returning home may end up going hours out of the way, she said.

"Many times I just won't go places that I'd like to go because I don't want to spend all day riding around, or getting weird bookings, or whatever," said Beth Omansky, a passenger of TriMet LIFT, who also holds a doctorate in social work and does research on society's treatment of people with disabilities.

For riders with certain disabilities or health concerns, riding for up to four hours without a bathroom or food break can be unsafe and unhealthy, Redwine said.

Passengers also must be recertified every three years through an interview process, which sometimes even includes being accompanied by an occupational therapist to deem if they qualify for TriMet LIFT's service. Rather than feeling supported, it leaves people with disabilities feeling that TriMet LIFT is trying to "rule people out," Omansky said.

LIFT drivers have been in contract negotiations with First Transit for the past two and a half years.

First Transit is a Scotland-based company contracted by TriMet, and has been receiving complaints from riders and drivers alike for a little more than a decade, when they acquired Laidlaw International, Inc., the company who formerly operated the Portland Metro area's paratransit service.

"From what drivers say, there's a noticeable difference from when First Transit took over," said Norton-Kertson.

"Laidlaw, I'm sure, wasn't perfect, but most of these problems started with First Transit. And drivers in particular have gone on strike or threatened to go on strike numerous times over the last decade or so over issues with First Transit."

Dozens of complaints on First Transit have been filed with the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industry, over the years, for a variety of reasons, including disability related concerns. All of them are now closed, most because they were withdrawn or ruled unsubstantiated.

In a statement from Trimet, Tia York told Street Roots that "TriMet has worked with First Transit to ensure operators have access to restroom facilities. To support LIFT operators in their route responsibilities and provide safe, accessible locations for restroom breaks, TriMet started providing access to nine additional badge-access restroom facilities within its service district during the last year.

"Because they do not operate on fixed routes," York said in her statement, "and because service is by reservation only, LIFT operators enjoy greater flexibility to access adequate facilities. In addition, TriMet has confirmed with First Transit that LIFT operators are allowed to take comfort breaks outside regular break times. For safety and security reasons, they are required to first contact dispatch. If the operator finds herself in an unfamiliar area, dispatch will guide the operator to a location where a restroom can be utilized at no cost."

When asked about the conditions drivers were complaining about, First Transit spokesperson Jay Brock had this response:

"First Transit follows guidelines set by the State of Oregon, Bureau of Labor and Industries," Brock wrote in an email.

"Employees are provided with regularly scheduled breaks during their shift. In addition, employees can request a needed comfort break at any time. For the safety and coordination of our passengers and employees, we do ask that the driver notify our operations."

Regarding the complaint of long rides, Brock said First Transit and Trimet are partnering to identify solutions as ridership expands to outlying areas.

At the panel with the Worker's Rights Board last month, a representative from C-TRAN, Clark County's public transit system, shared that their paratransit service, which uses the same software as First Transit, but is operated in-house rather than through a contractor, runs more smoothly. Although it costs a bit more, both riders and drivers are more satisfied, and rides are much shorter, Norton-Kertson said.

Redwine, as a driver for LIFT, said she feels taken advantage of by both First

Transit and TriMet.

"Most of the drivers that work for LIFT are very compassionate people," said Redwine. "They put the passengers ahead of their own needs, they run their routes to get people off their bus in a timely manner. And both agencies know that's the mentality of our drivers, to help our passengers. And they use that. And it just looks to me like they're exploiting some of their measures in order to get a better outcome on the bottom line."

As contract negotiations continue, health insurance and wages are particularly important for LIFT drivers. Drivers hired after 2012 only have access to a catastrophic health insurance plan with a \$2,500 deductible, Redwine said.

"This kind of transit work, honestly, it breaks your body," said Andrew Riley, communications director for ATU 757.

Transit workers are at heightened risk for a host of health problems, such as deep vein thrombosis and circulation issues from sitting for long hours, chronic kidney issues from the lack of bathroom breaks, and bladder cancer and related issues from inhaling diesel fumes over extended periods, said Riley.

"(Health) insurance becomes this huge sticking point because this works makes you sick, and we know that health care is not exactly affordable in this country to begin with," Riley said.

Brock said he could not comment on health care matters while contract negotiations were ongoing. He did say that First Transit investigates every issue brought forward by a driver and that there are multiple ways for a driver to report an issue: "Directly to a supervisor, via an employee dedicated hotline, or to union management."

Low wages and poor health insurance, Redwine said, make the job much less attractive to potential applicants.

While TriMet LIFT has some particular issues, Portland Public Schools bus drivers for students with disabilities are also experiencing many similar ones, such as low wages, poor health insurance and their employer not taking complaints seriously.

"Even in places where paratransit drivers are making close to what fixed route bus drivers are, they're not making the same wage," Riley said. "And I think honestly it's because they're working with folks with disabilities. And because of 'ableism' in our society devaluing people with disabilities, I think by extension we devalue everyone who works with folks with disabilities."

"I think that our lives are being disrespected," Omansky said. "I mean, every being has a certain amount of time on earth, and ours is being used up by TriMet. I feel that we're being disrespected and devalued."



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