

HISTORY OF ATU 757: A look at the past

We begin a monthly series recounting the history of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757 from its beginning to current times. You will learn about how and why our Local Union was formed and what the issues of the day were that led to organization. You will be able to follow the Local Union's growth and identify the leaders, accomplishments and setbacks that the Local has endured since its inception. Each month's installment will help you understand more about the Local Union and how it has had an impact on our members' daily lives.

The beginning

“The Motormen and Conductors employed by the Portland Railway, Light and Power Company, at least a large percentage of them, have concluded that it is the proper thing for them to become identified with the balance of the labor movement and have taken steps to form a local of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees of America.” That was the formal announcement found in the *Labor Press* dated Saturday, June 30, 1917.

In 1917, much of the world was troubled and at war. The employees of the transit system were also troubled by the need for their labor forces to be organized and united. Many of the meetings of these employees were held outside the maintenance shops and car houses as well as in rented halls and in private homes. In trying to reach the goal of unity, the **Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees of America** was chosen by the men to be their Union. The Amalgamated was chosen because it took in all phases of the transit industry, whether it be yardman, conductor, motorman, mechanic, blacksmith, arm winder or any other of the jobs required in transporting passengers on a street railway.

Brother Ed McMorrow of the International executive board was sent to Portland to assist in forming Local 757. On June 28, 1917, the **Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees of America** was granted a Certificate of Affiliation to Walter Clarence Elford, Alvin Albert McCormick, Sidney Thompson, Samuel R. Kingdon, Edward W. Brunner, Thomas P. Wood, George Walters, Noys R. Graves, Norman K. Paul and their successors.

The desire for organization was widespread among the men. Almost 500 applications for membership were already on file. Those interested in joining were told that it would not be “healthy for them to join the union.” It had been rumored that the company was importing strikebreakers from St. Louis and that company officials were employing a number of Italians to assist in breaking up the union. The Union's strength, however, helped to organize the workers and bring about the first contract. A pay increase of 1 cent an hour was announced. It was considered the first direct benefit of the organization.

The Local's first president was R. (Dad) Walker. The financial secretary/treasurer was W. C. Elford. Public press accounts reported a large number of nominees for each of the offices and the election process continued through most of the night. Wives of the streetcar workers showed a lively interest in the affair. In fact, a number of them remained at the scene all night to serve coffee and sandwiches.

The first contract agreement reached included required hours of service of 8 hours per day. All time worked over 8 hours, up to and including 11 consecutive hours, would be paid at the rate of time and one-half. Any work that was performed over 11 hours would be considered double time. The wage rate for the first 6 months of service was 36 cents per hour and for the second 6 months 38 cents. The rate for the second year of service was 40 cents per hour and thereafter 45 cents per hour.

Even the temperature was an important contract item. A temperature of 65 degrees had to be maintained in the vestibules of the cars from the first day of October to the first day of May.

Change had to be furnished to all conductors each morning when they reported for work. All extra trainmen were guaranteed a monthly wage of \$75. Those who greased the tracks received a minimum wage of \$90 a month.

The first contract took four months to negotiate. The meetings were held in the old Electric Building in the offices of Franklin T. Griffith. By October 1917, the streetcar workers were still struggling to get their increase in pay and the 8-hour day. The company insisted that it could not grant the demands of the Union because of a lack of sufficient revenue. The problems went to an arbitrator. The issue of an 8-hour day for streetcar employees was featured in the *Labor Press*.

Wartime activity in 1917 and 1918 placed an added strain on the transit system. To ease the problem the federal government in 1918 provided the city with 25 Birney cars. The cars were leased to the company by the Emergency Fleet Corporation and proved useful, especially on the less-traveled routes. The Birneys were one-man cars requiring no conductors. Although the company set about converting all their cars to one-man operations in the interest of economy, ridership continued a steady decline.

Meanwhile, employees of the company were working with the Taylor efficiency methods program. F. P. Maize, a master mechanic, submitted information to the *Electric Railway Journal*, advising others in his same position not to try to attempt the program unless there was a determination to stick to it and push it through "no matter what occurs." Maize reported that there would be plenty of hard work and many ups and downs before success was achieved. The planning and efficiency system in operation in shops of the Portland Railway, Light and Power Company was founded entirely upon the principles and methods made famous by the late Frederick W. Taylor.

At the time the program was put into place, the railway was operating from 400 to 500 cars, making a mileage of about 14 million miles per year. The railway had one large shop and four carhouses that were well scattered in the area. Details regarding the duties of each clerk were made known and were precise. There was no follow-up information available as to how the program actually worked in Portland.

By 1919, the Union asked for increases in wages "along the line" by making application directly to the War Labor Board. Car men now wished to work only the 8-hour day in order to give employment opportunities to more men. The Local said the wage for an 8-hour day was insufficient at 48 and 50 cents per hour. They asked for 56, 58 and 60 cents an hour. They wanted 15 additional cents per hour for operators of one-man cars. Membership approved the proposal.

Social activities went on as planned. Car men held a dance at the Cotillion Hall where the price of admission to the event was 65 cents for men and 35 cents for ladies.

In June 1919, Local Union President H. E. Kidney, acting under orders from the

International Union, instituted Local Unions of car men in Salem and Eugene. The organization then completed the chain of Locals for all northwestern cities. The new Union started with practically 100 percent organization.

Later that month, Local 757 asked members to decide on a referendum vote regarding a 5-day strike to begin July 4. Results of the election showed opposition to the plan. The International advised the members to vote the issue down.

In July, construction began on the Portland Labor Temple at fourth and Jefferson. Meanwhile, 1,600 Local and family members attended a picnic at Columbia Beach. Results of the foot races conducted at the picnic were mentioned prominently in the *Labor Press* the following month. A referendum vote by the streetcar men was held in August to accept the award by the War Labor Board; however, 75 percent of the membership disapproved of the wage award. The Local was bound by a former agreement to accept the award until the end of the war. The maximum pay for platform men was now at \$4.48 for 8 hours of work.

Highlights of the decade included the Meier and Frank switch from horse drawn wagons to motorized trucks. Carl Jantzen and Zehntbauer Bros. started the Portland Knitting Company. Reed College was founded. These events occurred in 1910. The Titanic sank in 1912. The first gas station in Portland opened the same year. In 1913, the country began income tax collection. The Central Library opened at S.W. 10th and Yamhill, and the Multnomah County Courthouse was completed. Babe Ruth made his debut in 1914, and the Panama Canal opened. Prohibition was enacted in 1916, and the first-ever MAC family picnic was held. The United States declared war on Germany in 1917 and Oregon won the Rose Bowl game. 1918 marked the first year for daylight saving time in America. World War I ended with the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, and Portland streetcars carried almost 70 million fares. A local business advertised men's suits at \$40. Ralston Oxfords sold for \$7.85.