



UTU BUS LINES

News items culled from the UTU's Daily News Digest, posted every morning on the UTU Web site, www.utu.org.

TSA chief defends bus, transit security

Transportation Security Administrator Kip Hawley last month sought to blunt Democratic allegations that his agency had neglected rail and mass transit security while focusing most of its attention on the terrorist threat to aviation.

"Effective measures are in place" to protect rail systems, Hawley said in appearance before a House Homeland Security subcommittee. Whereas the government provides for all the security personnel in the aviation sector, "most of the people in the rail and transit environment are paid for locally," he explained, adding that in the case of these systems, federal aid comes in the form of sharing information and technical assistance, and "does not include direct financial support."

Top subcommittee Democrats, however, skewered TSA for failing to produce the comprehensive rail mass transit security plan mandated by a 2003 White House executive order. "It is three years overdue," said Homeland Security Chairman Bennie Thompson (D-Miss.).

L.A. Metro seeks to cut dozens of bus routes

Seeking to improve overall service and shrink a \$104-million deficit, the Los Angeles MTA has proposed cutting about three dozen bus lines, the *Los Angeles Daily News* reports.

The changes would be implemented by June 24 if adopted this spring by the San Fernando Valley Service Sector, a community-based governance arm of the MTA.

The long list of proposed changes was triggered by the MTA's twice-yearly evaluation designed to ensure maximum use of its 2,500-bus fleet, officials said. Decisions are based on the previous six months of reports on passenger loads and on-time service.

The MTA has proposed cutting down on operating service on three bus lines that have low ridership during the early afternoon, at night and on weekends.

It also wants to shorten other lines, dividing 30-mile routes into shorter distances to improve on-time service since longer trips are more likely to get bogged down by traffic.

Cell phone ban sought for school bus drivers

The American School Bus Council is recommending that school bus drivers be prohibited from using cellular phones or other portable electronic devices – even those equipped with hands-free devices – while driving.

The group also advocates banning the use of cellular phones by drivers supervising the loading and unloading of students.

"The research is clear that cell phones cause drivers to lose focus," group co-director Pete Japikse said. "We don't want those distractions to be part of the school bus driver's environment."

Japikse said the group also will urge state lawmakers to take action.

There are at least a dozen states with laws or regulations prohibiting school bus drivers from talking on the phone.

The council's recommendation follows one from the National Transportation Safety Board, which said all bus drivers should be banned from using cell phones while driving.

Health care premiums stagger L-1741 drivers

The members of UTU Local 1741 in San Francisco have filed a grievance against Laidlaw Transportation after being sucker-punched by health-care premium increases that in some cases increased more than 760 percent in one month and wiped out some of their paychecks.

Members of the local drive school buses for the San Francisco public schools. Laidlaw has the contract to provide bus service to the school system and employs the bus operators.

The local filed a grievance against Laidlaw, claiming the health insurance premium increase violated their contract, and proposed an expedited mediation.

"Laidlaw can raise the rates, but contractually, not until September," said Local President Ange Belay. "But Laidlaw is not interested in an expedited arbitration and rejected that proposal." Mediation with Laidlaw officials could last until September or longer.

Premiums for single employees went up from \$18 to \$155 a month, Belay told the *San Francisco Daily*. For employees with one dependent,

the rate increased from \$29 to \$345, and for those on the family plan, it went from \$35 to \$455, she said. That means a driver under the family plan now will pay more than \$5,000 per year for health insurance premiums, compared to last year's \$420.

Though the bus operators are employed by Laidlaw and not the school district, Local Vice Chairperson Brock Estes recently asked the school board to pressure Laidlaw to speed up the arbitration.

In the meantime, the bus operators find themselves between a rock and a hard place. With average annual earnings of about \$30,000, Belay told the *San Francisco Daily* that many are having trouble putting gas in their cars for work.

The rate increase took the bus operators completely by surprise, said Estes, with some discovering on payday that their paychecks were completely consumed by the sneak-attack increase.

Four operators picked up their pay personally that day, Estes said, and at least one was driven to tears.

At a recent meeting attended by 75 of the local's 240 members, it was discovered that two in attendance had negative paychecks, four had zero-dollar paychecks and 25 received checks for less than \$25.

"Part of why people take this job is because health care costs were decent," Belay said. "But working with kids, drivers get sick a lot."

Estes said he thinks the increase may cause some bus operators to quit.

He also said that between the toll increase that went into effect on the Bay Bridge and the premium increase, many simply will need to find work closer to home.

Belay said many bus operators have dropped their health-care coverage and are trying to get on public assistance. Others are considering applying for jobs with the municipal bus system.

"This will be a shame that someone who meets the criteria to hold a school bus certificate will be doing a job that does not require the strict regulations we work under," Belay said.

Fired railroad workers win right to appeal

Rail workers who lose their jobs after failing background checks suggested by the government will now be able to appeal, according to the Associated Press.

At least three dozen railroad workers, mostly in the Chicago area, said they were fired unjustly because they failed criminal background checks recommended by the Department of Homeland Security.

Some had been hired by railroad contractors as part of work-release programs. Some had convictions for crimes that they said had nothing to do with terrorist activities, such as drunken driving.

The Department of Homeland Security is

expanding its efforts to secure critical infrastructure, including railroads and ports.

As a result, an increasing number of workers are finding that they must pass background checks to get security badges if they want to keep their jobs.

Ed Hamberger, president of the Association of American Railroads, told a congressional panel last month that the industry would give workers the right to appeal, something only their employer could do in the past. He also said the industry would make the appeals process clear to workers.

The Transportation Security Administration, a part of the Department of Homeland Security,

also issued guidelines outlining which crimes could disqualify workers from getting security badges, something that had been unclear. The TSA says ex-felons should be given a chance to keep their jobs if they could prove they have turned their lives around.

Civil rights activist Jesse Jackson, who took up the cause of the fired workers, said he was pleased with the guidelines and the appeals process.

"These guys can't afford lawyers," said Jackson. "They're just thrown back to the wolves."

According to Jackson, 12 workers were rehired after publication of an Associated Press story about the firings.