

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR UNION

*by Paul Stein*

Over the years we've had a steady turnover in drivers, and now many of us don't know about our history and how we came to have one of the best labor contracts in the school bus industry. Make no mistake, it did not happen by itself, and it did not happen because our employer thinks that we deserve the wages and benefits that we get. If we are to remain strong as a Union, and keep the standard of living that we have now, it is important to know how we got to this point. That's why I want to share some of that history with you.

Back in 1971, when I was first hired, my starting wage was \$2.85 per hour. We were guaranteed only 3 hours per day and had no sick days, almost no holidays, no health insurance, nor any other benefits for that matter. Seniority rights were almost non-existent, and the grievance procedure was really poor. There was a huge turnover in drivers.

The Local was run by a corrupt secretary-treasurer who sold sweetheart contracts to any employer who would buy Union life insurance policies, so that he could make money off the commissions. We created the Organization of Rank and File Drivers, (O.R.F.D. for short,) and began the process of taking over the Local and preparing for the 1973 contract negotiations.

In 1973 our committee negotiated with the Philadelphia lawyers of ARA Services, (Laidlaw's predecessor) all through the summer, and then went on strike for about two weeks. The whole process started all over in 1976, and at the beginning of school, we went out on strike again for two weeks.

We haven't had to go out on strike since, in a large part because of what happened in the 70s. We've never had a single person even contemplate crossing the picket lines. The mechanics stayed out with us, and the teachers union, the citizens of San Francisco, and others in the San Francisco labor community gave us their support as well.

In future issues I will describe in detail what happened at these important times in our history and what it was like back then, including:

- How we took over the local
- How we won our 1973 strike
- What happened in the 1976 negotiations and strike
- How we first got the "Prevailing wage and benefit" language in the bid specs.
- How we finally got a 401k plan
- How we got the 35 hour guarantee
- Our history of community support and public service.
- And more!

## A HISTORY OF OUR UNION, Part II

*How we took over the local* by Paul Stein

By the time I started driving in November of 1971, Paul Collier had already sold Associated Charter Bus Company a union contract that locked in the low wages of the newly hired 365 drivers that were needed when bussing started in earnest that fall. It was the time of Nixon's wage and price controls, the beginning of the United Transportation Union as a merger of four rail unions, and political unrest arising out of the anti-Viet Nam war and civil rights movements. There were a lot of people back then who just wanted to work at the bus company for the purpose of organizing workers into a militant union, and into various political groups.

Wages and working conditions were so bad that it was not hard to get people involved in trying to make things better, but first we had to get rid of the do-nothing secretary treasurer that seemed to have so much authority over the union. He wore dark suits, drove a fancy black Mercedes, and showed up every once in a while to ask how we were doing. If he dared to come to a union meeting he usually got shouted at by angry members.

The way we dealt with the company and the union was to have a caucus; a union within a union. We called it the O.R.F.D. and held secret meetings at various places around the city. That is where we planned how to take back our union, and to prepare for the 1973 negotiations.

Collier had sold about a dozen of these sweetheart contracts to various small companies that were not necessarily in transportation, but who wanted to keep other unions, such as the Teamsters, out of their workplace. Companies such as Milan Meats, Superior Scaffolding, Cable Car Tours, and more were in the local, but none had anywhere near the number of members as we did. When the elections for Local President and Sec. Treasurer came around, Paul Collier and his friend went to all these other companies and said we were a bunch of communists, and did what ever it took to defeat us. At first he was successful, but we protested the elections with the International, and they sent someone from Cleveland to hold a special election in California Hall. In the middle of the meeting someone cut off the electricity and left us in the dark. We lit matches and conducted part of the elections under match light, and that was the night we kicked out the bums, and put in all our own officers. Jose Muniz, Mattie Bee, Dave Shortino, and Dolores Gotaj were the first rank and file leaders of our new Union, and big changes were in the making.

A contract committee was formed to prepare proposals and demands for the upcoming negotiations, and I was asked to be on it. That was my first real experience doing union work.

In the next issue I'll try to remember what happened leading up to our first legal strike in 1973 and what was accomplished.

## **A HISTORY OF OUR UNION, Part III**

### ***THE STRIKE OF 1973***

by Paul Stein

Reading back on part one of this ongoing history of our union, I realized that I made a mistake in stating that the strike of '73 was two weeks long. I found an old Drivers Bulletin from 1983, exactly 25 years ago this month. It said that the strike was actually three days long. Aging brain cells and a desire to be accurate have convinced me to reprint part of that history of our union that was written in '83 for the new drivers of that era. Here it is:

The spring of 1973 was filled with preparations for contract negotiations, scheduled for that summer. A committee of drivers formulated a proposal which was discussed, amended, and approved. A Negotiation Advisory Committee was formed to keep the drivers informed of developments and to help the LCA stay aware of the feelings of the Rank & File. By late August, (the contract expired July 31st) the Company stood firm on its offer of an 8% raise (to \$3.48 per hour). This was unacceptable to drivers.

When school started, the drivers voted to strike. They were out for 3 days. No one scabbed, and Charter drivers and mechanics honored the drivers' picket lines.

The LCA was, meanwhile, under intense pressure in a downtown hotel, A UTU representative from Cleveland arrived. A federal mediator was called into the negotiations, and Mayor Alioto also joined in. A tentative agreement was reached.

It was eventually ratified by the drivers after a long, tense discussion. The new contract represented significant gains: a health plan, sick leave, a much-improved grievance procedure, and longer guaranteed hours.

Third year provisions of the contract were way above those of the 1st two years because the Company was not sure its contract with the district would be renewed. (sound familiar?) As it turned out, Associated did retain its contract, and the 3rd year of the labor agreement saw the greatest gains in wages and benefits, so far.

The strike of 1973 was the high point of Rank and File activity. More people actively participated than in the past, and the results were felt deeply by every driver. Not only had the drivers gained control of their union, but they had waged a victorious battle against the Company.

Our dignity and our rights were secured as never before.

To be continued.....