

ATU Local 192 and AC Transit Shift Into Gear Over Work and Family Issues

By Nicola Dones

It can be lauded as a sign of progress — but no accident — that members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 192 recently won significant gains in the area of work and family. The union's approximately 2,000 members, mainly bus drivers, and the Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District ratified a collective bargaining agreement that expands coverage of the federal Family and Medical Leave Act, allows use of sick time in hourly increments, and establishes a trust fund to help support the expansion of dependent care. Reflecting the commitment and drive of both union president Chris Zook and the labor-management dependent care committee she helped initiate, the new contract is a result of the many steps taken over the last seven years to achieve a work and family balance for ATU members.

Bus drivers work a variety of hours that include early mornings, evenings, and weekends. In the past, because drivers predominately were older men with grown children, child care responsibilities did not present a challenge. But this demographic began to change in the mid-seventies when AC Transit started to hire more women in a variety of jobs. Many of these new employees were mothers with young children, interested in becoming bus drivers because of the decent salary and comprehensive benefits.

New hires usually are given split shifts that include an early-morning run and a second in the late afternoon. With no child care available in the early hours, some new drivers solved the child care problem by having their sons or daughters ride with them on the bus. Union president Zook was a novice driver at that time: "Having your kid ride the bus was cause for discipline, so I would arrange to pick up my seven-year-old son at a stop on my route, away from the depot.

This was at 5:30 a.m. It seems quite barbaric now, but that's all we could do. It never entered our heads to ask for assistance from our employer." Drivers just juggled family responsibilities around a difficult work schedule. Like other working parents, they sometimes missed work to care for a sick family member, arrived late when last-minute child care plans fell through, and left early to take care of a family emergency.

ADDRESSING WORK AND FAMILY

In 1993, Netsy Firestein, executive director of the Labor Project for Working Families, was invited by an officer of the Local 192 executive board to speak on work and family issues at a board meeting. At that time, there was some polite interest in the subject but no real desire to explore it further. The following year, however, saw move-

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ment in the right direction when a union election brought more women into office, including Zook as president. Still, the new board had its hands full completing the work of the departing officers, and the real task of addressing work and family issues was not to come for another two years.

Two events occurred in 1996 that shifted Zook's perspective and elevated the child and dependent care issues for bus drivers to a higher level of priority. First, Firestein shared with AC Transit's joint labor-management committee a survey on the family responsibilities of bus drivers, conducted at San Francisco/MUNI and Alameda County/AC Transit. Completed in 1989, the survey was the first in both districts to clearly expose the extent of family responsibilities that drivers had to deal with on a daily basis and the impact those duties had on the district itself.

Second, Zook, herself, was asked to help care for her new grandson. Zook's son and daughter-in-law were struggling to deal with their own child care responsibilities. As Amtrack engineers with schedules of four days home and three away, their only option was to call on both grandmothers for help. With an even clearer understanding of the far-reaching aspects of child and dependent care needs, Zook pushed the joint labor-management committee to establish a labor-management child care subcommittee to address these issues. Luckily, she had the support of Sharon Banks, then general manager of AC Transit, who also had shown herself to be a strong advocate for balancing the demands of work and family. Looking back, Firestein describes this collaboration as pivotal: "Chris and Sharon were the two individuals who really pushed the issue. Without them I don't think it would have gone anywhere."

A REFOCUSED COMMITTEE

The child care committee's first step was to update the 1989 survey that focused on the child care needs of ATU members. With a response rate of 73 percent, the new survey identified the high level of absenteeism due to child care challenges and the frequency of problems that arose. The survey demonstrated that, over a two-month time period:

- 21 percent of respondents missed a day of work due to the closure of their child's center or school;
- 22.8 percent of respondents had child care arrangements fall through at the last minute; and
- 42.9 percent of respondents missed work due to a sick child.

Further, the survey illustrated that the annual cost of absenteeism to AC Transit ranged from \$1,428,923 to \$1,786,153.

Respondents expressed the need for child care during weekends and outside of the traditional hours of 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. They also called for emergency care for sick children and some sort of financial subsidy to cover child care costs. The findings also reflected the enormity of the current child care crisis that has made affordable, quality care almost non-existent.

Recognizing the breadth of responsibilities drivers were dealing with, and realizing its own limitations in addressing them, the committee attempted to get other entities within AC Transit to buy into their efforts to make some changes. First, a Dependent Care Assistance Program was introduced, allowing individuals to set aside a portion of their earnings in a tax-free account for dependent care expenses.

Next, the committee secured funding from the joint labor-management committee, which oversees all AC Transit committees, to contract with an Alameda County child care resource and referral agency to provide information on community resources. During a two-week period, agency

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staff were available to help match employees with appropriate and available child care in their communities. The committee also disseminated information to union members and management about scheduling time off to attend high school graduations and other school events. This initiative was hugely successful and gave many drivers the ability to get involved in their children's schools.

Eventually, the child care committee was renamed to more accurately reflect its broader focus encompassing dependent care. The committee then tackled another important component — educating supervisors who interact on a daily basis with bus drivers and other ATU members about dependent care issues. Last year, the committee began to develop a workshop covering state and federal laws that fall under the umbrella of AC Transit's leave program. The goal of the workshop is to both raise supervisors' level of sensitivity to these issues and create consistency in how they are handled. With the full support of AC Transit management, the workshop is scheduled to take place this summer.

CONTRACT GAINS

Last year, Zook sat down at the bargaining table with a comprehensive set of proposals addressing work and

family issues. With no real opposition from management, she was able to secure the following benefits.

- **Expanded leave.** ATU members are eligible to take leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act after 6 months and a minimum of 625 hours, cutting the federal requirement of 12 months and 1250 hours by half. Members also can opt to use accrued sick leave during FMLA leave. Employees who take FMLA leave for a newborn or newly adopted child also may work part-time and gradually return to work over the course of an additional 12 weeks following the exhaustion of FMLA leave.
- **Sick time in hourly increments.** For personal needs, members can use up to eight hours of sick leave per quarter in hourly increments. “This is the most important gain,” said Zook. “Under AC Transit’s prior policy, you could take two days of sick leave without a doctor’s note. However, you could not take a couple of hours for your child’s dentist or doctor appointment. As a result, employees took off more time than they wanted to or needed, just to take care of family or personal business. The use of sick time in hourly increments allows drivers to use only the time they have to without incurring any penalties or wasting personal sick leave.”
- **Dependent care trust.** The new contract sets up a trust fund to help address the dependent care needs of ATU members. AC Transit will contribute 3 cents for every hour worked by an ATU member. With about 2,000 union members, this amounts to a minimum of \$125,000 a year (this figure excludes contributions for overtime hours). The next task for the dependent care committee will be to decide how to best spend this money so it addresses the needs of Local 192’s members.

The steps taken by ATU Local 192 match the strategies used by many other unions to increase management’s awareness that dependent care issues also are workplace issues. The needs assessment survey, for example, effectively identified the problems employees face on a daily basis and how they have been resolved by taking time off, arriving late, or leaving early. And it brought home the direct link between work and family by illustrating the staggering financial costs to the company. By gaining support from AC Transit and winning family-friendly contract language, including a dependent care fund, Local 192 and Chris Zook are successfully bringing about change.