

Unions battle over Chicago Megabus drivers

By Micah Maidenberg March 09, 2015

An East Coast transportation workers union is trying to gain a foothold in Chicago, but the group will have to beat out an area Teamsters branch to do so.

Starting today, drivers for the local Megabus terminal began voting on whether to join United Workers of America Local 322, a labor group from suburban New York, or keep their representation with the International Brotherhood of Teamster Local 777, which is based here in suburban Lyons.

Drivers also can choose neither of the two labor organizations. Approximately 144 full- and part-time drivers here are eligible to vote, according to a filing from the National Labor Relations Board, the federal agency overseeing the vote.

Contested union elections are "more rare than they are common, but they do occur," said Robert Bruno, assistant professor of labor and industrial relations at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "Usually it's a product of some dissatisfaction with the current union. There are a lot of different bargaining units in transportation. . . . It's kind of a wild and woolly industry with a lot of different unions competing to represent those people."

The transportation sector is a relative stronghold for organized labor, with 19.6 percent of private-sector transportation and warehouse employees belonging to a union last year, compared with 6.6 percent of all private-sector workers, according to a **recent report** from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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Stephen Sombrotto, president of United Workers, said his labor group represents about 380 Megabus employees in terminals in the northeast, in Maryland and Pittsburgh. The union is aiming to organize all Megabus drivers under a single national agreement.

"It was the intention of drivers in the northeast to establish a union through the UWA that would create an umbrella agreement so everybody could be covered and represented in a much better and more efficient way," he said.

Messages left for James Glimco, president Local 777, or another representative of the union weren't returned. The union's members include school bus drivers and laborers around the Chicago area, according to its website. It had 3,310 members in 2013, a report the union submitted to the Department of Labor shows.

The election has taken a bitter tone, with the United Workers telling drivers here to not "listen to the lies and the Teamster tricks," according to a letter posted on the group's website.

Megabus is a unit of Stagecoach Group, a Scottish transportation company that operates buses, group tours and other services in the U.S. through the Coach USA brand.

The company launched Megabus service here in **2006**, and travelers can ride to 30 destinations from the Loop, from New York and Dallas to smaller cities like East Lansing, Mich., and Columbia, Mo.

Sean Hughes, a Coach spokesman, said Megabus is neutral in the upcoming union election.