



Amalgamated Transit Union

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Statement of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) LD 1796 – An Act to Protect Maine’s Transit Employees May 2, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), the largest labor organization representing transit workers in the United States and Canada. Founded in 1892, the ATU today is comprised of nearly 200,000 members in 267 local unions spread across 46 states and nine provinces, including the workers at Greater Portland Transit District and Regional Transit Program in Portland Maine, Community Connector in Bangor, and Biddeford-Saco-Old Orchard Beach Transit. Composed of bus drivers, light rail and subway operators, maintenance and clerical personnel, and other transit, intercity, and municipal employees, the ATU works to promote transit issues and fights for the interests of its hard-working members.

ATU fully supports LD 1796, which would define assault on a transit employee and codify the offense as a Class C crime, serving as a deterrent to these heinous attacks. The bill would also require public posting of the penalties and annual training on de-escalation for transit district employees. We strongly urge the Maine Legislature to pass LD 1796 as soon as possible.

A Dangerous Job

Due to the nature of their employment, which includes dealing with complaints, working alone, working late, and enforcing regulations, transit employees are vulnerable to horrific criminal acts. Nationwide, we have seen a huge increase in violence against transit bus operators in recent years. Unfortunately, these verbal and physical assaults are faced by transit workers in small towns and cities alike. Bus operators interface with every part of society on a daily basis, which includes dealing with people who are agitated or do not want to pay fares. And they are confronting all of this while trying to steer their vehicles through traffic and safely take passengers to their destinations.

Current Law is Not Sufficient

Maine already has higher penalties for assaulting a police officer, emergency medical care provider, or firefighter in the act of duty. LD 1796 extends similar protection to transit employees to deter interference in their work. Legislators in at least 32 states have come to understand that when transit workers, especially those individuals who operate vehicles, are assaulted in the course of performing their duties, the safety of every individual on board the vehicle is placed in immediate jeopardy. In addition, other cars, pedestrians, and bicyclists are put at risk when bus drivers are distracted for any reason, especially when they become the victim of a senseless assault or battery. The criminal penalties set forth under LD 1796 could send a strong message that transit workers and the people who rely on us to get to their destination are deserving of protection.

De-Escalation Training

While victims of assault should not be held responsible for the actions their perpetrators, and de-escalation training cannot eliminate all conflict and violence, it can be a helpful technique to reduce verbal and physical altercations against transit employees. To ensure that the de-escalation training is productive, LD 1796 would give front-line transit employees a say in the content training by requiring that the curriculum to be mutually agreed upon by management and the union's safety committee, where one exists. We fully support giving transit workers the tools they need to cultivate a peaceful work environment.

Conclusion

ATU commends the administration for the introduction of this critical legislation. This bill, which is long overdue, is unfortunately necessary in today's violent world. The hard-working transit workers in Maine and the customers we serve on a daily basis deserve to be protected from senseless criminal acts that can result in the serious injury or death of both workers and other innocent bystanders on our streets. It is time to take the necessary steps to protect the public at large.