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Local News

Taxi co-op applies for 150 licences

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ANOTHER taxi licence application was heard on Monday, setting off another round of accusations and denials in the industry.

At the heart of this application by newly formed Winnipeg Taxi Co-op and another one last month, is the contention -- aggressively disputed by incumbent operators -- that the market is not being adequately served by the number of taxis on Winnipeg's streets.

The Winnipeg Taxi Co-Op application for 150 new licences has the added feature of presenting a new type of structure for the industry -- a worker co-operative -- with the goal of creating a better work environment for drivers, which, they say, will lead to better service.

"There is evidence of a deep sickness in the industry right now," said Kristen Wittman, the lawyer representing Winnipeg Taxi Co-Op.

Winnipeg has one of the smallest taxi fleets per capita in the country, virtually unchanged since the mid-'90s. Last month, the owner of Spring Taxi applied for 100 new licences.

Lawyers for Unicity and Duffy's have argued that while there may be long customer waits during peak periods, drivers endure waits of an hour or more between fares during off-hours throughout the year.

SEED Winnipeg, an agency that helps economically marginalized people improve their livelihoods, is organizing the co-op. Official Terri Proulx said the co-op has signed up 126 people, even though they do so at the risk of repercussions as serious as being terminated from their current jobs in the taxi industry.

Two drivers at the Monday hearings claimed they have been unfairly treated by the dominant players, Unicity and Duffy's.

Aemero Ogbamichael said he was terminated without notice earlier this year after four years of driving for Duffy's because it was learned that he was interested in working with the co-op.

Another driver, Amanuel Hadgu, a 14-year veteran cabbie, said he has been blackballed because he applied for and received a temporary independent seasonal licence last year.

"My right to work has been violated," said Ogbamichael, an immigrant from Eritrea.

He said he was asked to sign a commission employment agreement that he said was more like a "threatening letter".

Wittman said the three-page form violates employment standards in many ways.

Among other things, it stipulates that the driver must remit his own income tax, Canada Pension Plan and employment insurance premiums. She said that is contrary to industry standards.

Another argument was that drivers do not have the same kind of standing for employment health benefits like Workers Compensation Board benefits.

Hadgu said he was in a traffic accident in 2005 in which he injured his back and was off work for two months.

The owner of the cab he was driving did not co-operate sufficiently to allow him to receive benefits while he recovered.

Navdeep Dhillon, president of Duffy's, said he was not familiar with the commission employment agreement and that it must be something between the owner and driver and that such agreements may differ from owner to owner.

The Monday hearing was adjourned until early August. But the Taxicab Board has made it clear it will not decide on the co-op or the Spring Taxi applications until after it has received a recently commissioned review of the industry.

Taxicab Board secretary Jerry Kozubal said it has just awarded the review work to Tennessee Transportation & Logistics Foundation, an agency connected to the University of Missouri in St. Louis.

martin.cash@freepress.mb.ca