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Press Release **Taxi Drivers Gain Right to Vote But Fear Retaliation**

For the first time ever, local taxicab lease drivers will elect their own driver representatives to the Taxicab Advisory Committee (TAC) of the Metropolitan Transit System. This historic event represents a major step in bringing lease drivers' voices forward in order to help address safety concerns, poor working conditions, customer service, and other general concerns of the public taxi industry in the San Diego metropolitan area.

United Taxi Workers of San Diego of San Diego (UTWSD) has proudly promoted democratic and participatory leadership within the taxi industry by successfully lobbying for equal 5 owner - 5 driver representation. The TAC board was established in September 1994 as a working group with a mandate to provide serious discussion and recommendations on local taxi industry conditions in metropolitan San Diego. Until now, the advisory committee was comprised of 9 owners, including 1 owner serving in a non-permit holder seat, members of the tourist industry, and one driver representative selected by the other committee members. On July 14th of 2011 the MTS Board voted 8 to 2 to equalize the committee's members thanks to the initiative of Marti Emerald, San Diego City Council.

Few passengers realize that most taxi drivers work 12-hour shifts, pay as much as \$865 lease fees per week, lack health insurance, and after paying increasing gas prices may earn less than \$5 per hour. Two driver advocates, **Berhanu Lemma** and **Hussein Nuur**, have bravely stepped forward to promote safety measures in the taxi industry. Lemma is a businessman who has worked for a local cab company since 2007 and came to know the taxi industry well in seven years of service at MTS. Similarly, Nuur has become well-acquainted with driver concerns in his fifteen years as a cabdriver and has gained respect while working in San Diego's nonprofit community. Both advocate for installing mandatory cameras, eliminating unjust termination and retaliation, increasing cooperation between MTS, police, and drivers to reduce racial profiling, and promoting safer vehicles. Their main objectives are to speak for drivers first, to understand the industry, and to promote authentic representation of driver conditions.

These driver representative elections will take place Tuesday, **November 15th through Thursday, November 17th, at 1501 National Avenue**, where taxi drivers will submit their secret ballots for two candidates. Members of the San Diego community, including Kevin Keenan, Executive Director of American Civil Liberties Union of San Diego, Hanif Mohebi, Executive Director of Council on American Islamic Relations, and Donne Frye have volunteered to serve as neutral observers of the vote validation process and to join with the Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice to hear any taxi driver complaints of retaliation.

"There is ever constant pressure to keep silent about current problems in the taxi industry. In a recent example, three drivers were fired for attending a public hearing where *others* expressed grievances about unsafe conditions," says UTWSD member Abdulaziz Muse. "We are very concerned about protecting our drivers from arbitrary termination." It is important that there be no retaliation of taxi drivers who participate in these elections.

One driver agrees, "This is America. We heard about democracy and individual rights and we want to improve the taxi industry. But now, we feel threatened by the possibility of losing our jobs simply for voting in a local election."

"Our next step is to ensure that drivers, whether they are voting or running in this momentous election will be empowered to elect a voice for themselves with the highest voter turnout possible," insists UTWSD President Mikaiil Hussein. The UTWSD is local association of lease drivers to represent their voice in the taxi industry.

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