

Detroit bus drivers stage sick-out

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Detroit bus drivers staged a sick-out Friday to protest low pay and unsafe equipment. The workers were also protesting the fact that they have been working without a contract since early 1998. The job action led to the cancellation of 400 of 500 scheduled bus runs, crippling the transit system that serves 140,000 daily passengers.

Al Martin, who heads the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT), denounced the drivers, calling their action "totally irresponsible and illegal."

More remarkable than the sick-out is the fact that the bus drivers' union, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 26, has been able to bottle up the workers' anger over sub-standard pay and worsening job conditions for months on end and block any industrial action until now.

Detroit's 800 drivers are paid about \$3 an hour less than drivers for the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART), which serves surrounding suburbs in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties. Detroit drivers are paid about \$13.65 an hour, which union officials say is among the lowest in the nation for big-city drivers.

The job action was apparently in response to a contract offer from the city which tied pay increases to the acceptance of concessions involving overtime, holiday pay and other issues. ATU Local 26 President Paul Bowen said the sick-out was over longstanding health and safety issues. He said new buses were needed because the current ones were held together with "duck-tape, chewing gum and chicken wire."

Negotiations between the city and the union were continuing Friday, with the city urging the union to tell its members to return to work. According to Greg Bowens, a mayoral spokesperson, Mayor Dennis Archer has "extended an olive branch" to the bus drivers' union, saying those workers who did not show up to work Friday would still be paid. ATU Local 26

President Bowen pledged that the drivers would be back to work Saturday.

Detroit bus driver Darrell Stewart said drivers want better maintained buses, improved security on the buses and wage parity with SMART drivers. "All we want is a fair and equitable contract," Stewart said.

The job action takes places as Mayor Archer and officials from surrounding areas are discussing merging or consolidating the city and suburban bus systems. SMART buses have already begun dropping off and picking up passengers on some city bus routes and Detroit bus drivers are concerned that DDOT will lay off employees after a transfer of city bus services to SMART.

The Michigan legislature, which has cut funding for public transit for the last two years, has threatened to end state funding if merger plans do not move forward. Detroit's public transit system, which has faced budget cuts and layoffs for more than two decades, already receives the lowest state and local aid of any major urban area in the US.



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