

Los Angeles transit workers strike

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More than 4,000 bus and train drivers, members of the United Transportation Union (UTU), went on strike Saturday against the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), after reaching an impasse in contract talks. The strike in the second largest US city affected some 200,000 passengers on the weekend and will affect nearly half a million riders when the business week starts Monday.

Small garment and toy manufacturers that employ thousands of low-wage workers just outside the downtown area expect that many workers will not be able to get to their jobs, resulting in the loss of millions of dollars if the strike lasts long.

The MTA is seeking to cut operating expenses from \$98 to \$96 per hour by implementing a series of measures, including changing the workweek to four ten-hour days in order to eliminate overtime payments after eight hours of work. In this way the MTA hopes to cut overtime expenses by \$2 million annually.

Currently, 400 drivers are on an eight-hour split shift. This means they work four hours during the morning commute followed by three hours off-duty when they are not paid, and then another four hours during the afternoon and evening. The MTA is proposing to increase this schedule to a 10-hour split shift, with a two-hour break. This demand has been made despite studies pointing to the connection between longer driving hours, increased accidents and chronic health problems.

Although a cost-saving of \$2 million is minor when compared to the MTA's \$2.5 billion budget, it is part of a series of measures, including reducing the number of full-time drivers through attrition, using lower paid part-time drivers and spinning off unprofitable lines to private operators. The UTU leadership has repeatedly said that it will not accept the four, 10-hour day shifts. Julian Burke, the MTA's chief executive officer, denounced the union's position as upholding

“antiquated work rules.”

The transit workers' strike caps more than a decade of concessions made to the MTA by the UTU. During this period the MTA has contracted out over a dozen bus lines and accepted increases in temporary drivers that are hired at substandard wages of \$10 and \$12.50 an hour, compared to the \$20 an hour top rate earned by full-time.

This is the seventh transit strike in Los Angeles in the last 28 years. In 1994, train and bus mechanics struck for 9 days.

Honoring the drivers' picket lines are some 1,800 mechanics, members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), about 600 members of the clerks union, plus supervisory personnel belonging to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).

Despite the efforts of the MTA to portray the transit workers as overpaid, the strikers have won significant support from riders and the general public.



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