

Los Angeles transit strike continues

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Negotiations between the striking transit workers union and the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) resumed with the state mediator Tuesday in the first talks since 4,300 bus drivers and train operators walked out September 16. The strike has crippled the public transport system of the US's second largest city, affecting some 450,000 daily commuters.

Members of the United Transportation Union (UTU) struck against management's demand for a new driving schedule that would eliminate the eight-hour day and force operators to drive 10 hours each day without receiving overtime pay. The MTA is insisting that it must cut rail and bus operator's pay by \$2 million a year by slashing overtime costs by 15 percent. This is part of a package of \$23 million in concessions that the transit authority is seeking from all of its unions over the next three years.

Other concessions demanded by the MTA include changing work rules so that less-skilled train service attendants perform some of the work normally done by mechanics, the replacement of retiring bus and train operators with lower-paid part-time workers and a commitment from the UTU to help lower workers compensation costs. The MTA is also favors the establishment of a San Fernando Valley transit zone, in order to spin off of some of its less profitable lines.

In return, the MTA is offering to raise operator's wages by a scant eight percent over three years and to increase its contributions to the union-controlled pension fund. In an attempt to intimidate the UTU bureaucracy, the transit authority said it would investigate the way that the unions are managing the pension and health benefit funds, a threat that it dropped from the negotiating table three years ago, once the UTU agreed to significant concessions.

Transit officials insist that the union givebacks are

essential for its financial well-being. The MTA faces a \$436 million shortfall over the next ten years. Twenty-eight percent of its operating budget consists of fare-box receipts. The rest consists of a half-cent countywide sales tax. The MTA's ability to raise fares is limited by a court-supervised consent agreement that settled a lawsuit from a bus riders advocacy group.

Summarizing the agency's position, MTA spokesperson, Marc Littman, declared, "It is difficult, if not impossible to raise fares. So where is the money to come from? They've got to get concessions."

The political line up against transit workers includes both Democrats and Republicans. The MTA's board consists of 13 members, including Los Angeles Republican mayor, Richard Riordan, his appointees, and several Democrats.

The so-called friends of labor on the board—Democratic County Supervisors, Gloria Molina, Yvonne Brathwaite Burke and Zev Yaroslavsky—all elected with county AFL-CIO support, have been particularly vicious in their attacks on striking transit workers. With the assistance of the media they have portrayed themselves as spokesmen for low-wage passengers who, they say, have been prevented from earning their living by the strike.

At a news conference Sunday, September 17, all three Democratic Supervisors condemned the walkout, with Yaroslavsky, saying, "You've got people who have supported labor... who will just not tolerate this kind of hostage-taking when it comes to public services." Burke, an African-American and former congresswoman who earlier sought to identify herself with striking janitors, accused the transit workers of "thumbing their noses at taxpayers and passengers." The one-time partner in a large corporate law firm added, "Primarily, I'm a manager. My main responsibility at the MTA is to make that into an efficient operating entity."

In a radio interview Monday, Yaroslavsky accused the drivers of not wanting to discuss their “out-dated work rules” even though, he said, the MTA was willing to trade wage increases for a reduction in overtime costs. Yaroslavsky insisted against the interviewer's skepticism, that many operators earn as much as \$80,000 a year, compared to an average wage of \$15,000 for transit commuters. In reality the average bus operator's wage is \$17.12 per hour—with a starting wage of \$8.00. A top-paid operator, earning \$20 an hour, would have to work 65 hours a week for an entire year to earn \$80,000.

Mayor Riordan—who was also endorsed for reelection by the county federation of labor—is determined to push through significant cost-savings before leaving office. Riordan spearheaded the establishment of the first “transit zone” separate from the MTA—the private Foothill Transit Co.—and he is a proponent of low-cost, nonunion regional bus services. Moreover, state legislators and congressional representatives from both parties are likely threatening to hold up funds for further transit construction projects unless the board wrests more concessions from the unions.

Despite the MTA's efforts to discredit them, so far the strikers are winning considerable public sympathy. Many riders know their bus driver and are aware of the long hours that they work. Amidst traffic snarls, and high temperatures, many commuters are walking, riding bicycles, and using taxis. “It's a hard job to be a bus driver,” said a janitor at USC. “Everybody knows they need better wages.”

At the Metro Blue Line Shop in Long Beach, a transit worker with 28 years service, said, “We get a lot of support from the public because they see that we are trying to make a living here. They walk, ride bicycles, because they know that what we are fighting for is a just cause. We stopped a UPS truck on Monday. They were on strike a few years back and are strong union supporters.

“In 1974, we struck for 68 days. This time I expect a strike of at least two weeks. The company is sticking to its position, but so is the UTU. There is a lot of work out there. None of us will have trouble getting work, while the strike gets resolved. Last time people worked as taxi drivers and tour bus drivers. As long as the economy is doing as well as it is, they must know that we as operators have options, so we will not be starved

into accepting a contract that we don't want.”

At the same time the driver expressed doubts over what the union would accept at the bargaining table. “Unfortunately, even if we win, we lose. That seems to be the way negotiations always go. My fear is that we win on the four 10-hour days issue but the union will give other things up. Two negotiations ago, we gave management the right to hire part-timers at \$10 an hour, top pay, in return for them not giving up some of our lines to private operators. Last time we gave up 7 lines.”



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