

Striking transit workers rally in Los Angeles

"Take from the bottom? Why not take from the top?"

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More than 2,000 striking bus and train operators from the United Transportation Union (UTU) protested at a strike rally in Los Angeles. They were joined by mechanics and maintenance workers from the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and employees from the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME.) The rally took place at the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) headquarters.

The city's bus and train operators have been on strike since Saturday, September 16. A major issue in the dispute is the MTA's drive to push through changes in workers' schedules that would reduce their overtime income by 15 percent. As part of an effort to eliminate \$2 million from the transit authority's budget, the MTA board is demanding that drivers and operators work a four-day, ten-hour split shift—two five-hour shifts with a two-hour break in between, for which the workers will not receive overtime compensation.

Aurelia Flores, a bus driver for ten years stated that, "working an 8-hour shift just barely covers the necessities. If I work only 8 hours a day, I make \$836 in two weeks. My rent is \$945 a month and my car payment is \$552. That's not enough." Mary Garcia, who has worked for the MTA for over a decade noted that, "there are a lot of women who are single parents working here. They need the overtime." Hearing Garcia speak, a 21-year veteran of the MTA chimed in. "I don't work overtime right now," she stated "but I have a lot in the past. Most everyone has at some point—to put kids through college or simply make mortgage payments."

Many of the workers this reporter spoke to confirmed that their ability to earn a living wage was largely the result of working very long hours. One man who has been driving a city bus for 16 years said that he "leaves

home at 5am and gets home at 8pm." Many were also quick to point out that the media has been falsely representing their situation. "My major grievance is that they are telling lies to the public. I want them to tell the truth about what we make," stated a striker. "Some think that our job is easy because we just sit all day. But it's incredibly stressful." One man noted, "A thankless job."

The attack on wages in the MTA proposal also includes the replacement of full-time bus operators with part-timers at a lower wage scale. In addition, it would deny drivers payment for the time they spend waiting for assistance when buses break down. Ms. Garcia complained of the constant maintenance problems that she and other drivers experience, often leaving them on the side of the road for several hours. One worker expressed concern that in their drive to cut costs, the MTA would reduce the time that maintenance is allotted to check the buses, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will break down.

The transit authorities maintain that without the changes they are demanding, the city's bus and limited rail system will be caught under a mountain of debt. The \$2 million management is seeking to save by drastically reducing overtime is only part of a larger \$23 million reduction in costs that the MTA is also seeking from other unions. Pointing to the MTA management offices rising above the strike rally, a worker who had been with the MTA for 18 years said, "You don't see those people volunteering for a pay cut. We're treated like second-class citizens." "Take from the bottom?" another worker asked. "Why not take from the top?"

At the rally many workers, concerned over two consecutive concession contracts, expressed skepticism in the UTU leadership and the sentiment that striking

had become something that was no longer about fighting for contract improvements. One train operator described the current strike as “maintaining what we have”. Feeling that the implementation of the MTA's demands would represent a major setback in the fight to protect working conditions against management inroads, workers expressed apprehension at the prospect that the strike might not be successful. “We have to win. That's all there is,” said one bus driver.

Seizing on the mood within the crowd, UTU general chairman James Williams proclaimed the determination of the union to hold out against the demands of the MTA. “This is gonna be one long strike,” stated Williams. “If they think they're going to balance a budget on your back, well they're in for the long haul.”

Militant-sounding pronouncements from the union speakers were well received by the strikers and their supporters. Yet neither the UTU nor the County AFL-CIO would explain why their Democratic and Republican allies on the MTA board, Los Angeles County supervisors Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, Gloria Molina, Zev Yaroslavsky and LA mayor Richard Riordan, have turned against the transit workers so vehemently.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Riordan insists that the MTA should be asking for bigger concessions from its workers. “I think we've asked for too little,” said Riordan, who was elected with the support of organized labor in Los Angeles.

The anti-worker positions of these politicians did not stop the UTU from bringing other “friends of labor” to the rally stage and promote Democratic politicians. Miguel Contreras, head of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor introduced mayoral candidate Antonio Villaraigosa saying: “Next year, when [Villaraigosa] becomes mayor of LA, we won't have these problems.” Contreras also introduced liberal LA city council members Nate Holden and Jackie Goldberg at the rally, asking that they intercede to bring Riordan back from France, where he is vacationing.

Despite the fact that many seemed to have pinned a lot of hope on the ability of the union to oppose the cuts demanded by the MTA, several workers expressed anxiety about the UTU leadership.

When asked what he thought the prospects for the strike were, a driver with 18 years' service stated, “I don't know. I hope but in the past they (the UTU)

always cave in. In my past experience they have let them (the MTA) chip away at benefits and working conditions.”

Several other transit workers who had been in the UTU for almost two decades expressed similar feelings. “In the past, the union hasn't represented us as well as they could have,” commented one worker.

A driver who has been working for 21 years seemed pleased by the UTU leadership's current resistance to the MTA's demands, but she also began citing the implementation of a three-tier wage structure, reductions in vacation time, and increased hours at the same pay, as areas in which the union had failed to protect the workers. Pausing for a moment in the discussion, she stated, “The last contract—the union gave it away.”



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