

Striking Los Angeles transit workers defy union officials and continue walkout

Jerry White, Carlos Menendez
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Striking transit workers in Los Angeles on Wednesday overwhelmingly rejected a proposal by California Governor Gray Davis that they return to work without a contract for a seven-day “cooling off period.” Seconds after United Transportation Union (UTU) President James Williams presented the governor's proposal at a mass meeting of the strikers, the auditorium erupted with shouts of “No! No! No!” and the workers voted by acclamation to continue the walkout. Some 4,400 bus and train operators have been on strike for nearly three weeks.

The vote followed the decision by non-striking mechanics, cleaners and supervisors, who are represented by two other unions—the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)—to defy their leaders' orders to cross the picket lines of their fellow workers and return to work. The mechanics, cleaners and supervisors have been honoring the UTU picket lines since the strike began September 16.

On Monday afternoon officials from the ATU and AFSCME told their members to return to work for seven days, but by the following day virtually all of the ATU and AFSCME workers had decided to continue honoring the bus and train operators' picket lines. Instead of crossing, large numbers of these workers joined the UTU picket lines on Tuesday. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that only 8 out of nearly 2,000 mechanics reported to work.

ATU members reacted with disbelief and anger to the union officials' order that they cross the UTU picket lines, particularly since UTU operators had stood behind them during a strike in 1994. Only last Friday at a rally of 4,000 transit workers in front of city hall, ATU officials pledged solidarity with the UTU

operators until the strike was won.

At one picket line Wednesday morning workers hung a banner saying, “Why Neil? [A reference to ATU Local 1277 President Neil Silver] Just when we had them by the balls!” ATU mechanics and cleaners, whose union accepted two-tier wages and other concessions in their last contract, expressed disgust with the union leadership. One worker, referring to Silver, said, “Everybody feels he sold us out. We don't want any backdoor deals.” Another said, “I am still shocked that our president would ask us to cross a picket line. It is ridiculous.”

The strike-breaking by the two AFL-CIO-affiliated unions was part of a quid pro quo between the ATU and AFSCME leadership and Democratic Governor Davis. Just two days earlier Davis signed a union-backed bill requiring existing labor contracts to be extended to any regional private company the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) might create to run its bus operations over the next four years. In exchange for Davis's signature, which will allow the union bureaucracy to continue to collect dues from lower-wage transit workers, the ATU leadership agreed to help smash the UTU strike.

Standing shoulder to shoulder with Davis's representative at a Monday press conference, ATU Local 1277 President Silver said the governor had “removed a major issue in our dispute with the MTA” and called on the UTU to end the walkout. Ordering his members back to work, Silver said, “If there is a picket line, it will be crossed.” The governor's spokesmen expressed Davis's “appreciation to ATU and AFSCME for being willing to go back to work.”

Oran McMichael, a spokesperson for AFSCME, said that 500 supervisors would also return to work. McMichael made the absurd claim that the actions of

the two AFL-CIO unions would put pressure on the MTA to settle.

After the ATU workers refused to follow Silver's instructions, the local president defended his strike-breaking collusion with the governor. "The governor gave us a tremendous, tremendous favor. He helped our families, helped save our jobs," Silver said. "[The governor] said show me something. Get the buses out on the street. I don't think that was such an outrageous favor after he did so much for our families."

UTU members struck against the MTA's demands for sweeping changes in scheduling that would eliminate the eight-hour day and force operators to drive for ten hours without overtime pay. Management also wants to create a two-tier workforce by hiring more part-time drivers, who would earn lower, entry-level wages and not be eligible for health care or other benefits.

These demands are part of a package of at least \$23 million in savings that the MTA is seeking to extract from all the unions. In addition, the MTA is pushing for the creation of so-called new transit zones, where the MTA could contract out its bus routes to private companies that pay substandard wages, a project backed by Mayor Richard Riordan.

County Supervisor Don Knabe, a member of the MTA board, said the governor's decision to extend union contracts to the new transit zones meant management would have to press for even more concessions from transit workers. "We are going to need even more relief from work rules because it is going to be more difficult to create a zone," he said.

For its part, the UTU leadership has expressed its willingness to compromise on management's demands, including a State Arbitrator's proposal that would increase the hiring of part-time drivers at a \$10-an-hour top pay rate. This would have the effect of reducing the MTA's overtime payments to full-time drivers on weekends. Several days ago UTU President James Williams said, "Things are looking up. I hope to have a deal real soon."

The repudiation of the ATU by the membership has bolstered the resistance of the striking transit workers and impeded the efforts of the UTU leadership to wear them down and push through a pro-management agreement. According to MTA executives, the UTU leadership promised that the strike would be resolved 24 hours after the governor signed the bill.

However, the brazen strike-breaking by the ATU apparently took the UTU bureaucracy by surprise, with Williams calling the move a "mistake." One element in the betrayal of the strikers is a bitter jurisdictional dispute between the UTU bureaucracy and the ATU and other AFL-CIO-affiliated unions. Over the last few years the UTU and the ATU have sought to counter the loss of members and dues income by raiding each other's membership base.

In one case the UTU filed a charge against the ATU for signing a sweetheart deal with a bus company contracted by the New Jersey Transit Authority, whose employees are organized by the UTU. Last March the UTU executive board voted to disaffiliate from the AFL-CIO after the labor federation's leadership sided with the ATU in the New Jersey case and then fined the UTU for raiding a railway workers union.

The AFL-CIO bureaucracy is also anxious to block the confluence of a series of struggles by workers in the US's second largest city, particularly in the midst of the union leadership's campaign for Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore.

The strike-breaking order against the transit workers issued by the ATU and AFSCME came on the second day of rolling one-day strikes by thousands of county employees, members of Service Employees International Union Local 660. On October 11, barring an agreement, all 47,000 county workers are scheduled to launch an indefinite strike.

Another struggle involves 100 Teamsters mechanics at Metrolink, which could shut down commuter rail service between LA and outlying counties. Finally, Los Angeles teachers recently voted overwhelmingly to strike later this month. These struggles are coming together with the five-month-long strike by Screen Actors Guild members, which is largely centered in Los Angeles.



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