

Los Angeles transit strike enters fourth week

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On Saturday, October 7, the walkout by 4,400 bus and train operators in Los Angeles entered its fourth week. It is now the longest strike in over two decades to hit the public transit system, the second largest in the US. As of Sunday evening negotiations between the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) and the United Transportation Union (UTU) had failed to resolve key issues, including the use of more part-time employees and the spinning off of operations to private regional bus companies.

Up until this point the resistance of the transit workers and the public support they have received has undermined the efforts of the union bureaucracy, California's Democratic governor and the city's Republican mayor, to end the walkout on management's terms.

Last week leaders of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)—the two AFL-CIO-affiliated unions which represent non-striking mechanics and supervisors—ordered their members to stop honoring the bus and train operators' picket lines and return to work. In a rebuke to the union leadership, the vast majority of ATU and AFSCME members refused to act as strikebreakers and instead many joined the UTU workers on the picket lines.

This act of solidarity encouraged striking the bus and train operators to overwhelmingly reject a proposal by Gov. Gray Davis to return to work for a seven-day “cooling off period.”

The back-to-work order was part of an agreement between the ATU and AFSCME leaders and Gov. Davis. In exchange for the governor's decision to sign a bill extending union contracts—for a period of four years—to private bus companies taking over MTA routes, the ATU and AFSCME officials promised to send their members across the UTU picket lines.

According to MTA officials, UTU President James

Williams was also a signatory to the deal, and said that a settlement would be reached within 24 hours of the bill being signed into state law. Earlier Williams let it be known that he was ready to agree to a contract containing many of the wage-cutting provisions demanded by the MTA board including the replacement of full-time operators with part-time operators making a top pay rate of \$10 per hour.

In an attempt to distance himself from the disgraced ATU and AFSCME officials, Williams has reportedly refused to sign a contract until the MTA includes a provision—known as Article 51—that protects drivers' pensions, pay and benefits if they are moved into smaller suburban transit districts. Gov. Davis administration officials and MTA management contend that the new state law provides that protection and that Article 51—which is part of the current contract—is no longer necessary. MTA officials described the UTU's position as “a step backward.”

For over a decade the transit unions, including the UTU, have allowed the transit authorities to proceed with their privatization plans and other cost-cutting measures. The current resistance of the transit workers expresses in large part a determination to stop more than a decade of concessions granted by the unions, including two-tier wages, subcontracting, elimination of cost of living adjustments and the spinning off of many MTA routes.

For their part, the ATU and AFSCME officials have defended their collusion with the governor to break the UTU strike. Last week ATU President Neil Silver issued a letter to his members denouncing UTU president Williams for not joining him in asking workers to return to their jobs. Silver wrote that the October 4 rally of ATU members was “more like a revival than a union meeting,” and called their voice vote rejecting a cooling off period “a slap in the face of the governor.” AFSCME officials issued a similar

letter.

The union bureaucracy is particularly anxious to wrap up the transit strike before it merges with other struggles by public service workers. Over the last week thousands of county workers, members of the Service Employees International Union, have engaged in one-day rolling strikes against cuts in real wages and reductions in medical benefits. The SEIU officials have said they would call an all-out strike by the county's 47,000 union workers if no agreement is reached by Wednesday, October 11.

Over the last several years the county has extracted wage concessions and job reductions under the threat of closing county hospitals and clinics. At the same time county officials have raided the workers' pension funds and put future retirees' benefits in peril. Democratic and Republican county supervisors are refusing to negotiate with the SEIU until they put a halt to the strikes.

Several of the same county supervisors who are spearheading this attack also sit on the MTA board, where they have taken a hard line against transit workers. For more than a decade, the union officials have collaborated with LA County supervisors to attack public service workers conditions and living standards. Not only did they make deals behind the backs of their members, but they also campaigned for and supported the politicians that are now attacking the public sector workers.

Other sections of Los Angeles public employees, including teachers, have also voted to take strike action. But in a development that portends how the AFL-CIO officials hope to block a unified struggle by the working class, the Teamsters union last week disavowed comments by a union organizer that mechanics at the Metrolink commuter rail line were preparing to strike. John F. Harren, secretary-treasurer of Teamsters Local 986, sent a letter to David Solow, chief executive officer of Metrolink, saying that "ongoing negotiations have been positive; no strike vote has been taken or even contemplated, no sanction has been filed for with any other union entity."

On the transit workers' picket line many workers expressed their determination to continue their struggle and anger towards the treachery of the union officials. Hugo Perez, an ATU bus service attendant, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "The truth is the mechanics and service attendants feel betrayed because we resent

being forced to turn on the bus drivers, people we work with every day, our friends. [ATU President Neil J Silver played a dirty game. A lot of the workers at my division are turning their backs on him. I don't appreciate what he did to us when he ordered us back to work. He thought he could snap his fingers and we would go back to work.

"In West Hollywood, the strikers are getting a lot of support from the people that live in the area. The picket lines are very strong there. My wife is a county clerk. She is currently on disability. She totally supports the county workers strike. She thinks that the cause of the strike is as much the money as the way the county treats the workers. When she went out for surgery, the county treated her as if she was a criminal. She had to sue them to get her pay.

"I am totally in favor of the UTU staying out on strike until the county workers go out, this will give us leverage against the MTA and the county. I have to tell you; if it's going to make a difference, our bus division is ready to stay out as long as it takes.

"We have lost too many divisions. Last contract we gave up bus Division 12 in Long Beach. In 1994 we gave up bus Division 16 in Pomona. Bus Division 9 at El Monte may also go. We were ready to strike in August during the Democratic Convention. The governor stepped in then. We can't let that happen again."



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