

Democrats, AFL-CIO pressure Los Angeles transit strikers to accept contract concessions

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Los Angeles transit workers returned to their jobs Wednesday and Thursday after union leaders, working in tandem with Rev. Jesse Jackson and other Democratic Party officials, pushed through a pro-management agreement to end the 32-day walkout by 4,400 bus and train operators. Shortly after workers voted to accept the deal Tuesday night, Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) officials, led by Republican Mayor Richard Riordan, gloated that they had achieved the \$23 million in savings they had demanded from the outset.

The United Transportation Union (UTU) acceded to management's two major demands: the introduction of more lower-paid, part-time employees and a substantial reduction in overtime payments for existing drivers. The new three-year contract allows the number of part-timers to expand from 650 to 980. Starting pay for these drivers will be \$11.60 an hour, or about half the rate of senior operators. The deal also enables the MTA to increase the number of drivers it can work 10 hours a day without paying overtime and to eliminate many work rules management denounced as "antiquated."

The three-year 8.3 percent wage increase for drivers will be more than compensated for by the \$10 million to \$15 million the transit authorities saved in labor costs during the month buses and trains were idled. The contract also paves the way for the further expansion of so-called New Transit Zones, where the MTA can spin off routes to private regional bus operators, a project pushed by Mayor Riordan.

"This is a very solid deal for the MTA," Zev Yaroslavsky, a leading Democrat on the MTA's board, said. "We're better positioned today than we were 33 days ago," he declared. With an eye to bondholders that service much of the transit system's large debt, Yaroslavsky added, "It was just as important to us to send a message that the MTA had the capacity to turn the corner on fiscal recklessness as it was to achieve the savings."

After the end of the strike MTA officials made it clear they were prepared to carry out further cost-cutting at the expense of transit workers and the riding public. This includes concessions from unionized mechanics and clerks, making millions in "administrative" cuts and raising the transit fare for the first time in the last five years. The fare hike and service cuts particularly underscore the cynicism of Democratic board members Yaroslavsky, Yvonne Burke and Gloria Molina, who denounced the strike for hurting the transit system's mostly poor and minority passengers.

Predictably, the leaders of the UTU and the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor hailed the contract as a victory, claiming that the MTA had been forced to accept "limits" on its demands for part-timers and the cutting of overtime payments. Another major achievement pointed to by union officials was the bill signed into law by California's Democratic governor, Gray Davis, during the strike. The law extends present union contracts to any employees who may be transferred to the new transit zones. The deal, which will do little or nothing to slow down the privatization of the system, instead guarantees the union bureaucracy continued dues income from workers employed by private companies, which will operate at lower costs than the MTA.

The defeat of the month-long transit strike was not caused by any lack of solidarity on the part of strikers' coworkers or hostility from the public. On the contrary, from the onset of the walkout non-striking mechanics, clerks and supervisors honored the bus and train operators' picket lines. Despite the best efforts of the MTA board—which spent \$1 million in public relations expenses, including radio, TV and print ads—the striking workers enjoyed widespread sympathy from working class and middle class commuters. Finally, the transit strike became the focus of tens of thousands of other public sector workers, including LA County workers and

teachers, who either walked out or overwhelmingly voted to strike against the same Democrats and Republicans who were spearheading the attack against the transit workers.

The transit strike was, instead, betrayed by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which, as the saying goes, snatched defeat out of the jaws of victory. Consistent with its role over the last 20 years, the union bureaucracy isolated the striking workers and collaborated with big business politicians to impose management's demands. The first effort to break the strike was not carried out by MTA management or Mayor Riordan, but by the two AFL-CIO-affiliated unions which represented the non-striking mechanics and clerks.

In exchange for Governor Davis's signature on the bill assuring the unions' continued role in the new transit zones, the leaders of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) ordered their members to cross the UTU workers' picket lines at the beginning of the month. This effort failed, however, when ATU and AFSCME members defied their union leaders and refused to return to work. The following day UTU workers overwhelmingly rejected the governor's proposal—brought to them by UTU President James Williams—to return to work without a contract for a seven-day “cooling-off period.”

Then the top leadership of the AFL-CIO and Service Employees International Union Local 660 called off a strike by more than 40,000 LA County employees on October 12, just one day after launching a supposedly indefinite general strike. This action not only weakened the county workers, but enforced the isolation of the transit workers, who welcomed the support of their fellow workers in the public sector. Transit workers continued to persevere, however, and on October 13 over 2,500 striking bus and rail operators unanimously shouted down the “last, best and final” offer from the MTA that was presented by the UTU leadership.

The following day, at the request of Los Angeles AFL-CIO county federation head Miguel Contreras and mayoral candidate Antonio Villaraigosa and Gil Cedillo—two former union officials who are now key Democratic state legislators—the Rev. Jesse Jackson was brought in as a mediator. Jackson, who was campaigning with AFL-CIO leader John Sweeney to drum up votes for Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore, has been used by the union bureaucracy over the last 20 years to “put out fires,” i.e., squelch struggles by workers against union-

busting, plant closings and other attacks over which they were losing control. Earlier this year Jackson participated in the betrayal of the Los Angeles janitors strike.

Initially Riordan and his Democratic counterparts on the MTA board were reticent about Jackson's intervention. However, with the mayor and transit authorities isolated and with assurances from Jackson that he would not seriously undermine their demands, the city and county officials welcomed the reverend's assistance. During non-stop negotiating sessions Monday and early Tuesday, Jackson convinced UTU leader James Williams that he would be able to sell the increased use of part-timers to his members.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, “Jackson said he believed the key to resolving the dispute was convincing full-time drivers their economic security would not be threatened by part-time drivers in the new contract. After discussions with Jackson, Williams walked into a negotiating room and told Riordan, ‘Mayor, you are a tough foe. The strike is over. It's time for busses to roll.’” Jackson told the *Times*, “That was a glorious moment.”

In a press conference afterwards Yaroslavsky praised Jackson, saying, “Once again I have grown to admire his skills.” The MTA board official added, “We achieved our savings goal in this contract,” saying of the new offer: “It's the same house but much of the furniture has been moved around.”

After the tentative agreement Jackson joined Williams and various AFL-CIO officials to sell the deal to a mass meeting of bus and train operators. Declaring that “This fight is about the dignity of working people,” Jackson said, “In the end, victory is when everybody wins.” UTU officials acknowledged that the agreement “wasn't everything the members wanted,” but said it was fair. No doubt feeling that it was fruitless to sustain a strike with a leadership that had no capacity or perspective to lead a serious struggle, the overwhelming majority of UTU members present voted to end the longest transit walkout in Los Angeles in the last 20 years.



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