

AFL-CIO moves to isolate Los Angeles transit strike

Jerry White
14 October 2000

The leadership of the AFL-CIO and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) ordered 40,000 Los Angeles county workers to return to work without a contract Thursday after only one day of what was supposed to be an indefinite general strike. The move not only undermined the county workers' fight for decent wages, but dealt a blow to a month-long strike by 4,400 LA transit workers.

For nearly two weeks thousands of county workers have been involved in rolling partial strikes to demand a 15.5 percent wage increase. The County Board of Supervisors, which is made up of some of the same Democratic and Republican politicians who are attacking the transit workers, has refused to budge from its 9 percent wage offer, citing the possibility of a budget deficit three years from now. Although the average county worker's wage is \$32,000, many make \$20,000 or less, meaning they live in near-poverty conditions in a region with exceptionally high living costs.

Union officials called off the strike after an intervention by Los Angeles Archdiocese Cardinal Roger Mahoney, who said the walkout was hurting poor people dependent on county services. The Cardinal's call for an end to the strike was coordinated between Republican Mayor Richard Riordan and the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. Mahoney is a political ally of Riordan, who sits on the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) board, which is spearheading the assault on the striking bus and train operators. The Cardinal is also a political confidante of AFL-CIO President John Sweeney.

While most workers reacted to the calling off of the strike with anger and disbelief, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that "those close to the talks said it delivered union leaders with a badly needed exit strategy from a

conflict that had many liabilities." One SEIU official described the Cardinal's intervention as "heaven sent."

The AFL-CIO leadership has intervened in Los Angeles to dampen the militancy of public sector workers and head off a confrontation with Riordan and Democratic officials. The AFL-CIO is politically allied with Riordan and the county officials who have sought to make public employees and the working people they serve pay for cutbacks in social spending and tax breaks for big business.

In 1995, when the county health department faced bankruptcy, Sweeney, then the head of the SEIU International, intervened to block a movement of LA county workers against the threat to close public hospitals and carry out mass layoffs. Sweeney agreed to a deal that led to the layoff of 2,500 workers, included huge concessions in wages and benefits and allowed the county to raid the workers' pension funds. In exchange, the Clinton administration organized a \$1 billion bailout of the health department.

On the eve of the county workers' walkout, the MTA board announced it was making its "last, best and final" offer in the transit negotiations. The contract proposal contains many of the regressive demands that provoked the walkout, including replacing full-time with part-time drivers and changes in scheduling that eliminate the eight-hour day and overtime payments until after 10 hours, and in some cases 12 hours, of work.

The resistance of the transit workers was bolstered by the solidarity of striking county workers. But the AFL-CIO moved in to smash up any coordinated struggle by public sector workers and isolate the transit workers. The day after the county walkout was called off, the United Transportation Union, which represents the striking workers, moved to bring the MTA's final offer to the membership for a vote. Although UTU President

James Williams recommended a “no” vote in an effort to protect his own credibility, Williams has worked closely with the AFL-CIO and Democratic and Republican officials to wear down the drivers, leaving them little alternative but to accept management's terms.

Earlier this month 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 transit mechanics and supervisors—ordered their members to stop honoring the bus and train operators' picket lines and return to work. The back-to-work order was part of an agreement between the ATU and AFSCME leaders and California's Democratic Governor Gray 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. UTU President Williams was also reportedly a signatory to the deal, and said a settlement of the strike could be reached within 24 hours of the bill being signed into state law.

In a rebuke to the union leadership, however, the vast majority of ATU and AFSCME members refused to act as strikebreakers, many of them joining the UTU workers on the picket lines. The following day UTU workers overwhelmingly rejected the governor's proposal—brought to them by Williams—to return to work without a contract for a seven-day “cooling-off period.”

The failure of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy to end the walkout led to redoubled efforts by the Sweeney leadership and its local allies to undermine the transit workers' strike. This set the stage for calling off the county workers strike just at the point when tens of thousands of workers in Los Angeles had joined the transit workers in a common fight.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact