

Striking Los Angeles transit workers return to work without a contract

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Los Angeles County's mass transit system resumed operations this week after the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) ordered its 2,400 striking mechanics and service employees back to work on Monday evening. After 35 days on the picket lines, the workers have returned to their jobs without a final contract.

The ATU leadership ended the strike upon securing a 7 percent wage increase over three years from the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and an agreement to enter nonbinding arbitration to resolve all remaining issues. The arbitration process will be conducted by a three-person panel, to which the MTA and the ATU will each appoint a representative of their own choosing and jointly agree on the third member.

The union membership will not have an opportunity to vote on the final contract, which the ATU and the MTA are predicting will take months to sort out. Instead, the agreement can be rejected only by a two-thirds vote by either the MTA or ATU board.

The decision to end the strike was brought to a vote before the union membership on Wednesday—two days after the picket lines were taken down. Of the 1,355 workers who cast ballots, 85 percent supported the leadership's decision. However, with more than 1,000 ATU members failing to attend the meeting, the return to work was actually approved by only 48 percent of the total membership.

The order to return to work without a contract and the grossly antidemocratic character of the arbitration process underscore the degree to which the union officialdom has repudiated the most basic principles of working class solidarity and functions as a bureaucracy that is unaccountable to the rank and file.

The central issue in the strike was the status of the workers' health care benefits. This matter, which will now be resolved in arbitration, was of primary concern

to both the striking mechanics and the ATU bureaucracy, although for entirely different reasons.

The membership supported the union leadership's call for a strike in mid-October because they saw it as the only means of opposing the MTA's demands for drastic increases in their monthly health care contributions. The transit agency has been insisting that, in return for bailing out the union's nearly insolvent \$17 million health care fund with a one-time \$4 million infusion and an increase of \$300 per worker in its monthly contribution, current employees raise their health payments from \$6 to \$80 a month. In addition, the MTA wants to freeze its health care contributions for retirees at current levels, forcing these workers either to make up the more than \$300 monthly difference themselves, or accept drastic reductions in their coverage.

The overriding priority of the ATU leadership, on the other hand, is to retain control over the health care fund—not out of concern for the benefits of union members, but rather out of concern for its own bloated salaries, privileges and power, which would be threatened should it be forced to share control over the fund with management.

From the outset of the strike, the ATU leadership, headed by Local 1277 President Neil Silver, has made clear its willingness to accept the more than tenfold increase in monthly health contributions demanded of the workers by the MTA. The fact that the union has placed the question of health coverage for retirees in the hands of an arbitrator demonstrates its willingness to accept sweeping give-backs on this issue as well.

The union bureaucracy fundamentally differs with the MTA on two issues—control of the health care fund and the size of the MTA's one-time bailout. The ATU leadership has been resisting the MTA's demand for

joint day-to-day control of the fund. In addition, the union and the MTA disagree over how much money the transit agency should contribute to ensure the account's solvency. The union wants an additional \$5 million beyond the \$4 million the transit agency has already offered.

The union leadership has been pressuring the MTA for weeks to agree to arbitration because it thinks it has a better chance of forcing the transit agency into some sort of agreeable compromise on control of the health care fund through arbitration rather than through continued negotiations.

The ATU was finally able to get the transit agency's consent to enter arbitration after a court ruled that four Democratic politicians who are members of the MTA board could participate in the negotiations despite having received campaign contributions from the ATU. Over the course of the past week, these politicians weighed in on behalf of the union leadership, pressuring the MTA into accepting arbitration.

The betrayal carried out by the union is entirely in keeping with the overall conduct of the strike. From the outset the bureaucracy worked to isolate the transit workers from the rest of the working class in Los Angeles. The ATU leadership made no effort to link the transit struggle with that of 70,000 supermarket employees currently on strike and locked out in Southern California. Like the mechanics, the grocery workers are locked in a bitter dispute with their employers over health benefits.

In the entire course of the strike, the ATU leadership negotiated behind the backs of the rank and file, refusing to call a single meeting of the membership.

The high level of abstention in the vote to return to work, with just over half of the ATU members casting ballots, reveals a deep distrust for the deal hammered out by the union bureaucracy. According to a report in the *Los Angeles Times*, at the vote meeting held on Wednesday a bus mechanic called out in the middle of the meeting, "We didn't strike for wages, Neil, we were on strike for benefits.... Why did you cave?" The speaker was greeted with stormy applause.



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