

Minnesota transit workers strike against assault on benefits

A correspondent
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Metro Transit workers in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region are coming to the end of their first week on strike against a drive by the management of the Metropolitan Council to severely undermine health care, pensions and wages for the 2,200 members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1005. The union began its strike March 4 after a long drawn-out period of fruitless negotiations with the Met Council backed by Republican Governor Tim Pawlenty and a legislature determined to place the burden of rising health care costs and decreasing subsidies on the backs of workers.

While the governor and his appointee, Met Council Chairman Peter Bell, claim to be “disappointed” with the strike, the work stoppage has been largely provoked by their determined policy to slash transit funding. Since 2002 the legislature has cut funding by 18 percent and the route system has been reduced by 7 percent. Metro Transit’s figures show that compared to similar cities the Minneapolis-St. Paul system brings in the highest per-passenger trip revenue while ranking second from the bottom in securing governmental subsidies. By limiting appropriations, and with no dedicated funding, the Met Council came into bargaining in a position to demand workers take their offer or strike.

On wages, the council’s two-year contract proposal imposes a wage freeze in the first year with a miserly one percent increase in the second.

On the issue of health care, the Met Council is proposing that workers—who pay \$265 a month for family coverage under the expired contract—will have to pay \$304 a month in the first year and \$401 a month in the second year.

Under a formula in the old agreement, full-time drivers with between 10 and 17 years could qualify for

retirement and have two-thirds of their health insurance benefits paid. The tentative proposal calls for the two-thirds formula to be tossed out and replaced by a set amount and the minimum number of years to be set at 17. Even worse, for new workers hired after January 2004, the benefit will be entirely eliminated.

Pickets informed the WSWs that starting pay for new-hires will be reduced from \$15.67 an hour to about \$12 and it will take seven years to reach top pay. But the seven-year formula for part-time workers will make it especially difficult to advance along the pay structure. “If you’re a part-timer, you’ll never get there,” said one driver.

The pressure to impose this contract on workers was intensified after two days of the strike when the head of the Taxpayer League, observing that the strike did not cause severe freeway gridlock, declared, “Transit just isn’t that important to the smooth functioning of the Twin Cities transportation system. That’s the obvious conclusion to be drawn from the lack of chaos engendered by the bus-system strike.”

In reality, the transit system provides 220,000 rides on a daily basis to an estimated 75,000 riders. Metro Transit has determined that a third of their riders have no other means of transportation. Some 40 percent of workers in downtown Minneapolis and 20 percent of those in downtown St. Paul use the bus. At the University of Minnesota, 33 percent of commuters use the bus. In addition, special services provide necessary transportation for the disabled.

The transit negotiations have revealed disagreements in ruling circles. The Minneapolis *Star Tribune* describes the Taxpayer League as “founded by a small group of wealthy Republican conservatives” who want to slash public transportation and instead finance road construction. A *Star Tribune* editorial described the anti-

transit legislators as follows: “[T]ransit’s enemies don’t care. Once they were a small cell of malcontents in the House of Representatives. Now they dominate the Legislature.”

The decline of support for the Democratic Farmer-Labor (DFL) party among workers can in part be explained by who the “liberal” opponents represented by the DFL really are. Among those defending transit are the likes of American Express, which has 7,000 workers in downtown Minneapolis, and Wells Fargo, with 10,000 employees throughout the Twin Cities.

But “support” for transit and the defense of workers’ living standards are two different things. Despite the hard line of the Met Council, the *Star Tribune* warned before negotiations broke down, “This strike must be avoided because the only winners would be the enemies of transit who look for every excuse to reduce ridership, cut service and force as many metro residents as possible back into cars and onto the roadways.”

The mouthpiece for conservatives, Met Council Chairman Peter Bell, has attempted to stir up backward elements against the transit workers by branding their health care benefits as a “Cadillac” or “Ferrari” plan. Even the *Star Tribune* has used this attack by saying, “People don’t welcome the prospect of paying taxes to support state worker benefits that are more generous than they themselves get. Worker solidarity seems a thing of the past.”

In fact, pickets report greater public support for their stand today than for their 18-day strike in 1995. Virtually every section of the working class today can identify with some aspect of the assault being leveled against transit workers.

Despite this support, there is no strategy on the part of the AFL-CIO union leaders to mobilize this sentiment behind strikers. Instead, there is the grave danger they will be isolated and worn down while the Met Council shuts down operations to save money. Bell has indicated he has no plans to renew bargaining for the moment and Local 1005 President Ron Lloyd has indicated the strike might go on for two months.

In the recent period, two other sections of state workers have faced similar attacks. During 2001, over 20,000 state workers walked out against the administration of independent Governor Jesse Ventura, only to be sold out at the end of their strike. Last year, University of Minnesota clerical workers also walked

out, were isolated, and then compelled to make concessions. And as transit workers presently walk the picket line, the United Food and Commercial Workers are negotiating with the supermarket chains on behalf of 14,000 grocery workers whose contract expired February 29.



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