

Concessions imposed on Pittsburgh, Penn. bus drivers

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The Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) international office and leaders from the AFL-CIO have intervened in negotiations between the Allegheny County Port Authority and its 2,500 public transportation workers to impose a concessions contract demanded by local Democratic Party officials.

The Port Authority of Allegheny County, which includes the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is the 15th largest public transportation system in the country, serving 250,000 people daily. The bus and trolley drivers had been working without a contract since June 30, when their previous contract expired.

Under the terms of the new contract, bus drivers and light rail drivers, along with maintenance personnel and staff workers, will begin paying 10 percent of health care premiums. Health care deductibles will also increase. Employees will have to pay \$250 for individuals and \$500 for families in the agency's PPO (preferred provider organization) health plan, and have even higher co-pays if enrolled in the HMO (health maintenance organization) plan. Prescription co-pays will go up to \$45 per prescription for everyone.

By far, the major cutback is in health care and benefits for retired workers. Currently, workers age 55 with 25 years service are able to retire with full health care coverage until they are eligible for Medicare. This has now been changed to age 60 with 30 years service. New hires will receive no health coverage at all when they retire.

The contract also eliminates a \$500 a month pension supplement for workers retiring early until they are

eligible for Social Security. The impact of these cuts is, in effect, to move the retirement age up for most workers from 65 to 68, depending on what year they were born.

The current confrontation began in October, when Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato withheld \$27 million in county funds earmarked for the Port Authority. Onorato, a Democrat, has been the most vocal opponent of Port Authority operations, demanding that the wages, health care and pensions of its workers be cut.

With the withholding of the \$27 million, the Port Authority stands to lose an additional \$183 million in matching funds from the state and federal government. Port Authority officials said the transit agency would run out of money by the New Year and that service would have to be ended starting in mid-December of this year.

In mid-November, the Port Authority announced that it would unilaterally impose the health and pension cuts beginning December 1. Local 85 of the ATU, which represents the workers, said that it was illegal to impose a contract and that the cuts constituted a lockout of its membership.

This is where things stood until Dan Onorato held a private meeting with AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka, in which the county executive laid out his demands for concessions. Trumka later met with the international ATU, and in an unprecedented move, both Port Authority officials and local union officials were called to Washington DC for four days of talks to push through the concessions contract. In all, the four-year

contract is said to save the Port Authority \$93 million.

The union leadership demonstrated its role as an agent for management, by opposing any struggle on the part of workers that might tarnish the Democrats' image. In addition to the attacks on unionized employees, the Port Authority has cut the health care and pensions of its nonunion workers.

Last year, the agency also cut 15 percent of its service, mainly to working class areas, and many evening and weekend runs relied upon by low-paid workers to get to and from work. The Port Authority also raised its base fares to \$2.00 and plans another 25-cent increase in January.

While claiming to be on the verge of bankruptcy, the Port Authority is going ahead with its North Shore extension, a \$500 million project to build a tunnel under the Allegheny River to transport passengers on a light rail trolley over to the new Pittsburgh Steelers football stadium and a casino. The project is already millions of dollars over-budget.

The WSWS spoke to workers at a meeting to ratify the contract on Sunday, December 6. The general mood was one of resignation in light of the downward spiraling economy.

Dave, who plans to retire in a few months, has worked for Port Authority Transit (PAT) for more than 20 years. Prior to that, he worked for 10 years at US Steel. He said, "I am a machinist journeyman with a B.S. in electrical engineering.

"I have worked in maintenance all of my life. I am currently a signal man routing signals from South Hills Village to downtown Pittsburgh underground to ensure that the system runs, put out any fires, and troubleshoot to make sure that you and everyone else is able to get to work on time.

"With the way the economy is now, we feel that this is the best we could get. Nobody wants to strike, but we also didn't want to give away our jobs. So, this is a happy medium.

"We have heard a lot about eliminating legacy costs.

My definition of a legacy cost and the company's is very different. I believe the legacy costs that are haunting PAT are the ones left behind by managers who took big payoffs and then left. That is where the losses are coming from."



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