

San Francisco transit workers reject concessions contract

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On Tuesday, February 16, transit operators of the San Francisco Municipal Railway (Muni) rejected a \$15 million concessions contract negotiated by the city and the union, the Transport Workers Union of America.

The 857-575 vote against the contract is an indication of growing working class opposition to the policies of the corporate and financial elite. It deserves the full support of all workers in the Bay Area, who face similar attacks on jobs and living conditions.

The major concessions included requiring workers to pay in \$8.9 million to their pension fund previously contributed by the city. The effect is a substantial wage cut for transit workers. In addition, a change in overtime rules would limit overtime to hours worked in excess of 40 hours a week, regardless of the length of time worked in a given day.

The vote by workers was directed not only against the city, but also the TWU. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, TWU Local 250-A president Irwin Lum had “signed off on the deal after several days of closed-door negotiations with Mayor Gavin Newsom, Muni management and the union’s executive committee.”

Now, the union is working behind the scenes with the city administration to find a way to force through the concessions. The *San Francisco Weekly* reported on Monday that Lum said “the union members would meet ‘sometime this week and decide what to do’—and he hopes his colleagues will reconsider their ‘no’ vote.”

The demand for the concessions is purportedly to stave off an increase in discounted passes for seniors, youth and the disabled and also prevent cuts in services. Muni’s governing board is scheduled to vote February 26 on a budget-balancing plan to close a projected \$16.9 million deficit for the current fiscal year. Directors then must address a projected \$53

million deficit for the next year. This follows a hefty increase in fares in 2009, with the monthly Fast Pass increasing from \$45 to \$60 and bus and metro fares rising from \$1.50 to \$2.00.

Local media are waging a full-court offensive to portray transit workers as overpaid and privileged, citing an automatic pay raise next year totaling \$8 million. There is a systematic effort to cast the workers as responsible for fare increases, rather than the city administration that is actually implementing these policies. Their aim is to divide the working class and prevent a unified struggle.

Muni workers’ salaries have been guaranteed by a formula in the City Charter since 1967, which indexes pay and benefits to a survey of other transit systems instead of establishing them through bargaining. The increase in pay is meant to make up for relative decline in the value of their pension and health care benefits.

The demand that workers pay into their pension program is in effect a repudiation of this formula, an attempt to permanently drive down the living standards of transit operators. Many workers are justly concerned that this supposedly “one time” extra contribution will turn into a permanent measure.

Democratic Mayor Gavin Newsom is leading the attack, pressuring the Muni operators to reconsider their vote on the concession package. Newsom threatened “draconian cuts” that “would outrage riders who see operators drawing a fatter paycheck while they’re left with less service.”

San Francisco City Supervisor Sean Elsbernd, a Democrat who currently serves as Vice-Chair of the Rules Committee and Chair of the Transportation Authority’s Finance Committee, threatened to immediately begin collecting signatures for a ballot initiative to eliminate the minimum salary mandate in

the city charter.

The argument, accepted by the entire media and political establishment, that there is simply “no money” to both provide transit workers with a decent wage and ensure affordable transportation for the public is a lie. There are not a few individuals in San Francisco who could cover the \$15 million demanded from transit workers with a personal check. The individuals drawing “fat paychecks” are not the transit workers, but the corporate and financial elite that created the economic crisis.

In rejecting concessions, transit workers have taken an important stand against this attack. However, if the initiative remains in the hands of the TWU, transit workers will simply be presented with a new concessions contract and asked to vote again.

A successful struggle against concessions requires the formation of a rank-and-file committee, independent of the TWU. An immediate appeal should be made to transit riders and all sections of the working class in the Bay Area to mobilize against the attack on wages and social services. Only through united struggle can this offensive be resisted.

The attack on transit workers is part of an effort throughout the state and across the country to make workers pay for the economic crisis. Trillions have been allocated to the banks, but state and local governments have been starved of resources and are pushing through draconian measures. At all levels of government, both Democrats and Republicans have ruled out increasing taxes on the wealthy to pay for the crisis.

These political parties, with the trade unions in tow, unreservedly defend the capitalist system—the subordination of all aspects of economic life to private profit and the pocketbooks of the wealthy. The alternative to capitalism is socialism—the democratic control of the economy in the interests of social need.



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