

Arbitrator imposes concessions on California transit workers

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In a thoroughly undemocratic move, an arbitrator announced Monday night that transit workers at the San Francisco, California Municipal Railway (Muni) would have to accept cuts in pay along with other concessions. The decision arrived at by the arbitrator was nearly identical to the one that had been negotiated between the union and the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA), but overwhelmingly rejected by the workers in a June 8 vote.

The new binding contract will take effect July 1 and remain in force until 2014. The contract imposes a three-year wage freeze, along with increases in part-time workers, the reduction of overtime pay (an effective pay cut), and increased power of management over disciplinary and grievance procedures. Moreover, the contract includes a no-strike clause. The SFMTA is hoping to save between \$38 and \$41 million in labor costs in the next three years.

The Transport Worker Union Local 250-A has repeatedly reached concessionary agreements with the SFMTA that have been subsequently rejected by the 2,200 rank-and-file workers. The TWU is now working closely with the city government and SFMTA to impose this rotten deal on the workers.

After the arbitration decision was reached, local president Rafael Cabrera couldn't even bring himself to criticize the agreement. "We view this decision as a win for our members on wages, benefits, and pension issues. However, many of our members will be very wary of changes in work rules and the grievance procedure."

For their part, city officials issued threats against any attempt by transit workers to take independent action.

"There is a great distance between voting a secret ballot and doing something that could jeopardize your job," stated Tom Nolan, chairman of the SFMTA's

governing board. Similarly, City Attorney Dennis Herrera threatened to take "appropriate legal recourse" if work was disrupted.

The result is a complete violation of the basic right of workers to collectively bargain. The MUNI workers rejected the contract by 994-448, more than two to one. The TWU, the SFMTA and the city government are now imposing this contract by force, with any resistance from the workers declared illegal.

The ability of the city to enforce this concessions contract is due in part to the passage of Proposition G last November. The proposition eliminated provisions in the City Charter that indexed the wages of Muni operators to a survey of other transit systems, rather than including them in collective bargaining. This section of the charter was won by workers in exchange for a relative decline in their pension and health care benefits. Proposition G thus paved the way for the wage freeze in the present contract.

Proposition G also established a procedure to send contract decisions to a supposedly "independent" operator for a binding decision in the event that an agreement could not be reached.

The passage of the proposition was the culmination of an extensive campaign waged by local Democratic Party politicians and the media. Transit workers were vilified for being "overpaid" and responsible for fare increases in the transit system.

Like teachers and other public employees who have struggled for their rights, the Muni workers were immediately denounced by the corporate press after the latest rejection as well.

The San Francisco Examiner published an editorial entitled, "Muni operators to San Francisco: Drop dead," while an editorial for *The San Francisco Chronicle* read "A rogue union." The latter condemned

the “inexplicable” decision of the Muni workers to reject the contract, claiming that the workers need to be ready to make sacrifices given the hardships suffered by other cities and the state as a whole.

“Have these drivers missed the news about forgone raises elsewhere in the state?” the *Chronicle* sanctimoniously declared. “Maybe they haven’t noticed that workers in the private sector aren’t offered a pledge of no layoffs, as Muni drivers are. Closer to home, they’ve ignored a battle brewing on how deeply to cut pension and health benefits, a political issue that’s led the city’s biggest labor groups to offer significant concessions. What makes Muni drivers so different?”

The editorials’ contempt for the Muni workers merely reflects the consensus among the US political establishment at all levels of government that the economic crisis created by the corporate and financial elite must be paid for by the working class. In the process, there have been attempts to divide workers whenever possible—between the private and public sector, and documented and undocumented workers.

The accumulation of staggering levels of wealth by the financial oligarchy has been increasingly based on speculation and other forms of social parasitism. By contrast, public workers like teachers and Muni drivers, who actually provide a socially productive service, are characterized by the corporate media and politicians of both parties as “greedy” and “selfish.” This in a state where the 19 richest individuals command a combined net worth of \$135 billion—including the \$12 billion of Larry Page, the richest person in the Bay Area. Calls for “shared sacrifice” are completely fraudulent.

The Transport Workers Union and the San Francisco Labor Council (SFLC) are working hand-in-hand with the Democratic Party to impose concessions on the workers that they nominally represent. The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are pushing through austerity measures on the national (President Barack Obama), state (California Governor Jerry Brown), and local level (San Francisco mayor Edwin Lee).

To defend their rights, transit workers must form a rank-and-file committee independent of and in opposition to the Transit Workers Union. The TWU is not an organization of the working class, but a tool of the government and the corporate elite. This committee must reject the cuts imposed by the arbitrator and

organize opposition.

The success of such a struggle, however, depends on the mobilization of the entire working class in a common fight against the attack on jobs, wages, and social programs. The Muni workers should use their critical position in transportation to help build for a general strike not only in the city, but throughout the entire state.

Such a struggle is inherently political. The experience of the transit workers, and the working class throughout California and the US, demonstrates that both Democrats and Republicans represent the corporate elite. The defense of the rights and interests of the working class must be bound up with the building of a mass political movement that fights for a workers’ government and the socialist reorganization of the economy, to meet social need, not private profit.



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