

Detroit bus drivers stage one-day strike

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Over 100 Detroit bus drivers refused to go out on their routes Friday following an altercation between a driver and a group of passengers the previous evening. The driver was treated for his injuries and released from a local hospital.

The unofficial strike forced the cancellation of many routes, leaving thousands of bus riders stranded. The walkout took place under conditions of a near collapse of public transit in the city due to budget cuts. Transit users including those who need to get to jobs, schools, and doctor appointments have faced the elimination of routes and waits of long as three hours for a bus.

Inevitably, these conditions have fueled friction between transit users and drivers in a city already rife with social tensions due to massive unemployment and pervasive poverty. However, in the wake of the walkout the only demand raised by the drivers union, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 26, was for increased policing of transit routes, including random police boarding of buses.

In recent days there have been protests by both Detroit and suburban transit users over cuts to service. The day before the drivers' walkout more than 100 people packed a public hearing in Dearborn, Michigan on proposed cuts to SMART, the Detroit metropolitan area transportation system. SMART officials say they plan to lay off 123 employees and cut service by 22 percent due to declining property tax collections caused by the collapse of home values in Detroit.

The cuts proposed to the SMART system, which includes the elimination of 15 routes, are on top of previous staff reductions and fare increases. A final decision on the cuts is set for November 14, with two more public hearings scheduled.

Earlier in the week dozens of Detroit bus riders and workers attended a noon rally at the Rosa Parks bus terminal in downtown Detroit to protest the state of city bus service. The rally was organized by MOSES, a

Detroit area organization connected to various churches. City buses are run by the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT.)

A major factor in the public transit crisis in Detroit is the lack of serviceable buses. According to Detroit Democratic Mayor David Bing the city needs 305 buses on the streets on any given day to keep routes on time, but is averaging about 100 buses less than that. As recently as mid-October, 200 of the department's 438 buses were waiting for repairs.

Bing and other city officials are scapegoating bus mechanics, who have faced job cuts, furlough days, and the elimination of overtime, for the maintenance backlog. The number of bus mechanics has fallen from 210 to 148 over the last two years due to layoffs and retirements.

The crisis is being compounded by the fact that Detroit's older bus fleet requires more service hours per coach. The average age of DDOT buses is 7.8 years.

In October Bing threatened to contract out more bus repair to private shops if the situation was not resolved in thirty days. His administration is also seeking to fire "underperforming" mechanics.

In the past five years the DDOT budget has decreased from \$80 million to the current \$55 million. The most recent round of cuts of \$10 million were enacted by Bing last year.

Public hearings held in the fall of 2009 over proposed cuts to bus service drew large numbers of residents and bus drivers who spoke out forcefully against service reductions. The mayor's response was to send police to intimidate speakers at some locations.

Megan Owens, Executive Director of Detroit Transportation Riders United, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the crisis facing Detroit area

public transit. The group has been working for a dozen years to improve transit, including supporting a regional transit system for Southeast Michigan, with support from members, local businesses and foundations.

She said: "It's pretty outrageous right now with the situation at DDOT and the proposed SMART route cuts. Detroit and the State of Michigan have been underinvesting in public transit for years. Detroit spends less as a region than other major cities. In fact, that figure is more like one-third as much as other major cities. We estimate \$75 per capita is spent on public transportation here while other major cities spend \$250 per capita on average.

"SMART does recognize that people are using the service to get to new businesses that have located in downtown Detroit. What they are doing is maintaining service at rush hour but the changes will adversely impact people who work at other times and come in from the suburbs.

"If you are not using buses between 6 and 9 AM and 3 and 6 PM you will have to transfer to city buses and then you also run into the ongoing problems with the city service. It really applies in both directions. The people who need it most are going to be the ones most affected, like people who live in Detroit who are trying to get to the suburbs to work.

"The cut in service in Detroit is enormous. In the past five years they have cut over one-third of service. That is service that is completely gone from the schedule. On top of that, one-third of the service on the routes that are left is gone because the buses aren't repaired and because Detroit is, if this is a real term, under-bused anyway."

Transportation Riders United also reports that the Detroit People Mover is raising its fare by fifty percent, from 50 cents to 75 cents. This is a municipally owned company separate from DDOT and SMART that operates an elevated train that makes a closed loop around Downtown Detroit office buildings, casinos and other venues.

The attack on public transportation comes in the

midst of an assault on all basic services in Detroit. Schools, recreation centers and fire stations have been shut. Cultural institutions such as local libraries are also under attack, with ongoing protests being held against the proposed closure of six branches of the Detroit Public Library.

Meanwhile, the Republican administration of Michigan Governor Rick Snyder has implemented cuts to food stamps and cash welfare benefits, impacting tens of thousands of low-income residents in the city and surrounding suburban areas.

The fight to defend public transit and other basic services requires a program that starts not with what the corporate elite in Detroit, for whom Bing is the spokesman, says it can afford, but with the needs of working people.

What is required is a united struggle of all sections of the working class—teachers, city workers, bus drivers and mechanics, professional workers alongside students and the unemployed. New organizations are needed to wage this fight. Rank-and-file and neighborhood committees should be established independent from the unions and the Democratic Party establishment to mobilize the full power of the working class against ruling elite and its political representatives in Detroit and Lansing.



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