

# Ithaca bus drivers speak out against salary cuts

An ISSE reporting team  
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Members of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) spoke to transit workers in Ithaca, New York, on Saturday to discuss the contract negotiations that are ongoing with the local United Auto Workers (UAW) union that nominally represents the drivers and the company itself, TCAT (Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit). The transit workers have been operating without a contract for almost six months since the old one expired on September 11, 2011.

The primary aim of the workers—bus drivers, mechanics and bus handlers—is to keep their pay commensurate with cost-of-living increases. The latest three-year contract offer by TCAT would give a \$500 bonus to the drivers the first year, a \$525 bonus the second year, and a 1.25 percent salary increase for the third year. Given inflation, including spiraling health care and food costs, the offer amounts to a year-over-year pay cut.

The offer was voted down by the workers, with 61 voting against and 19 voting in favor of the contract. Workers' counteroffer of a constant 1.25 percent salary increase for all three years was refused by TCAT. The company cites rising fuel costs and decreased state funding as reasons against a salary increase.

Ernesto, a bus driver for TCAT, told the ISSE, "We know that we are in hard times. That's why we're not asking for much. TCAT wants to give us a bonus of \$500. That's only 25 cents an hour. That's not enough to live on. That's why we are asking for the constant salary increase.

"The bus drivers also don't have a pension plan, so we need the salary increase for our 401k plans, which take 10 percent of our pay. A \$500 bonus doesn't go toward that and basically vanishes after taxes anyway. I also have to now pay \$460 for medical insurance each month. That's a lot of money, especially with no salary

increase."

Ernesto added that many of the workers are upset with the way the local union, UAW 2300, has handled the negotiations. "We pay union dues, so why aren't we getting any help? They just want their dues. Unions are just another big business."

"The international [UAW] is even worse," Ernesto said. "They sent us a letter saying that by voting down the contract, we were 'destroying the gains' that made the UAW. What gains? That's just a scare tactic." The letter was authored by Region 9 servicing representative Jamie Leiss.

Ernesto went on to describe the relationship with TCAT's board of directors and the local region, and his frustration with TCAT in general. "The TCAT board of directors have a conflict of interest. They are all selected from the [Tompkins] county, the City of Ithaca and Cornell, who are all the main funders of TCAT." Each of these agencies provides three people to form the TCAT board of directors, with Pam Mackesey as the incoming TCAT president.

"TCAT has also mismanaged a lot of funds," Ernesto said. "They hired a consultant company from Seattle for \$100,000 to try and make the routes more efficient. They did it without even trying to understand the local needs." This has contributed to TCAT's current \$500,000 deficit and the price hikes for bus fares for buses in outer areas of Tompkins county. "Also, why did the outgoing president, Hank Dullea, start hiring a bunch of assistants? What do these people do? There is no transparency about their salaries and benefits, despite the claims that there is."

Mackesey, the person enforcing the effective pay cut on transit workers, spent years as a union bureaucrat. According to her online biography, she "worked for several years as an organizer for the UAW and

Communication Workers of America [CWA] before finishing her undergraduate degree at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations in 1989. Pam spent the year following graduation as state organizing coordinator for the CWA in Pennsylvania before returning to Ithaca.”

Earl Stevenson, another bus driver who was only able to speak for a moment, talked about the importance of public transportation to the Ithaca area and the public in general: “Politicians [must] take public transit more seriously. People rely on it.”

This is not the first time that transit workers in Ithaca have had to fight for decent salaries. In 2005, bus drivers initiated a slowdown against the cuts. When TCAT threatened to fire participating workers, members of the Ithaca community rode their bicycles in front of buses to give the drivers a clear excuse for delays.

More recently, one third of TCAT drivers called in sick on November 10, 2011, in protest of an earlier phase of the current negotiations, disrupting 11 rural routes. This was done independently of the local union, which in fact distanced itself from the sickout as soon as it became apparent what happened.



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