

# Bay Area, California transit workers launch strike

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Thousands of Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) workers went on strike at 12:01 a.m. Monday following the expiration of their contracts. At the same time, Oakland city workers were holding a one-day strike and contracts for AC Transit bus workers expired.

The BART workers are opposing management demands that they begin paying into their pensions funds, accept increased health care costs, and settle for a 1 percent annual wage increase that will further erode their real wages.

The strike, the first since 1997, promises to have a massive impact on San Francisco, Oakland and other cities and towns in the Bay Area of northern California. There are 380,000 daily riders on the BART system and 240,000 on AC Transit.

The 1997 strike lasted for six days and caused traffic across the Bay Bridge to back up all the way to Livermore, 45 miles away. There is no alternative to BART for the majority of commuters.

According to union officials, the last contract offered on Saturday amounted to a \$9,700 reduction in compensation over its four-year duration.

The average station agent or train operator makes just over \$60,000 a year. Given the high cost of living in the Bay Area, any drop in compensation would be devastating.

The workers are also raising safety concerns, including the demand for additional measures to prevent maintenance workers from being hit by trains.

Thousands of BART and AC Transit workers in five unions are involved in the strike. The unions include the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU). Despite an overwhelming strike authorization vote from their members, the union leaders made clear they wanted to avoid a struggle.

The ATU actually appealed last weekend to Democratic Governor Jerry Brown to impose a 60-day “cooling off” period to head off a strike. SEIU Local President John Arantes stated that his members would show up to work if the governor ordered it. Arantes was quoted in the *San Jose Mercury News* as saying, “We will always respect what the governor says.”

BART officials, however, have told the governor they are opposed to a “cooling off” period. They are hoping to impose more sweeping concessions by forcing the issue now and relying on the union leadership to sell the workers out.

The unions are opposed to any broadening of the struggle. The SEIU, which represents both BART workers and city workers in Oakland, is confining the city workers to a one-day protest, rather than an indefinite walkout. The ATU, which also represents AC Transit workers, has declared the earliest bus workers would go on strike is Tuesday.

Thousands of health care workers in the Bay Area are working without a contract, but the unions have no intention of seeking to mobilize them in tandem with the transit workers.

The unions fear and oppose a broader mobilization of the working class because it would threaten their political alliance with Governor Brown and the Democratic Party, which are engaged in a brutal assault across the state on social services, education, health care and the workers who provide these services.

The California state budget has sharply cut funding since the 2008 financial crash, first under Governor Schwarzenegger, a Republican, and then under Brown. Public employees have seen effective pay cuts of up to 25 percent due to furloughs, while funding for needed safety measures and BART maintenance has been delayed.



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