

Strike shuts down main transit system in California's Bay Area

David Brown
2 July 2013

About 2,400 workers at the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system in Northern California went on strike yesterday after their contract expired, with management demanding a cut in real wages and increased health care and pension payments. The action shut down the main parts of the fifth-largest public transportation system in the US, with 400,000 BART riders on an average weekday.

The strike by transit workers is an expression of growing opposition in the United States and around the world to the endless demands, supported by both big-business parties, that workers accept pay and benefit cuts, even as the ruling class amasses ever greater levels of wealth.

The sentiment among BART workers for a struggle is overwhelming. Last week, 98.5 percent of the members of Service Employees International Union Local 1021—including mechanics, maintenance workers and professionals—voted to authorize the strike. Train operators and station agents in Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1555 approved the move by an even wider margin—99.9 percent.

The latest proposal from the BART officials includes two percent yearly raises, but these would be contingent on increased BART ridership, increased sales tax revenues, and fewer employees taking family medical leave. This would at best amount to wage stagnation, given inflation, and most likely would mean an effective wage cut.

At the same time, BART employees would have to start paying into their pension system and pay higher health insurance premiums. According to union officials the proposal would amount to a 3 or 4 percent annual compensation cut overall.

Over the past five years, BART workers have been forced to accept a freeze in wages. With price inflation,

this has resulted in a significant fall in real wages. Four years ago, moreover, the unions agreed to \$100 million in concessions in the name of “shared sacrifice.”

With the backing of the Democrats, the Republicans and the corporate establishment, BART, which is run by a special governmental agency spanning San Francisco and surrounding cities, is seeking to isolate the striking workers and force through a concessions contract.

On Monday, BART officials said there were no plans to resume negotiations. In an effort to lessen the crippling impact of the strike, local officials have increased the capacity of other forms of transportation, including offering free chartered bus rides.

In trying to isolate the strike, BART and the corporate political establishment are relying on the trade unions. Significantly, two other large sections of workers also saw their contracts expire at the same time as BART workers, but the unions representing them have opposed any joint struggle.

The contracts for all nonemergency personnel in the city of Oakland expired midnight Sunday. Over the past four years, these workers have been forced to accept major wage and benefit cuts in the form of furloughs and increased pension contributions. While the SEIU is the largest union representing both BART workers and city workers, city employees have been called out for only a one-day strike on Monday, aimed at letting off steam.

Similarly, AC Transit workers, who run busses in the entire East Bay with a daily ridership of 174,000, are currently working without a contract. Although the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) includes these workers in addition to some of the BART workers, the union has not called a joint strike. Instead, AC Transit has added more busses in an effort to break the BART

strike.

ATU Local 1555 President Antonette Bryant said on Monday that the union “would love” to end the strike and indicated that it would do so without a contract. “It could be resolved today if the district would come to the table and bargain with us fully and fairly.”

The actions of the trade unions are bound up with their political alliance with the Democratic Party and their support for the capitalist system.

At the request of BART officials, Democratic Governor Jerry Brown decided not to impose a period of enforced mediation, as requested by the ATU. Instead, he called on the SEIU and ATU to return to the negotiating table. Brown spokesman Evan Westrup said Sunday, “BART and its labor unions owe the public a swift resolution of their differences.” Brown was echoed in these sentiments by San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee.

No expense will be spared by the BART system and capitalist press to vilify transit workers as selfish and greedy. They will try to drive a wedge between those who rely on the transit system to commute and those fighting for a decent wage.

In fact, the same conditions face every section of the working class. The entire Democratic Party establishment is united in the drive for lower wages, with Brown, Lee and Oakland Mayor Jean Quan imposing furloughs and other cuts.

The attack on BART workers is part of the statewide assault on pensions. Cities like Stockton are looking to slash their pension obligations through bankruptcy. Brown has gutted pensions for new public employees and has been exploring ways to break the contracts that cover those already retired.

Since the economic crisis first erupted in 2008, the Democrats and Republicans have launched a coordinated effort to force the working class to pay for the crisis. Trillions of dollars were funneled into the banks by Bush and then by Obama, followed by budget-cutting at the local, state and national levels.



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