

Democratic Party officials, unions, seek quick end to Bay Area California transit strike

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Top California state government officials intervened to press for a rapid end to the strike of Bay Area transit workers on Tuesday, with the unions involved indicating their willingness to send workers back to the job without a contract.

On Tuesday evening, union leaders and management resumed negotiations.

The strike of 2,400 workers at the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system has had a crippling effect on the fifth-largest public transportation system in the US. The workers are eager for a struggle against demands for a cut in real wages and increased health care and pension contributions.

The major unions involved—including the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU)—are working to isolate the strike and ensure its defeat.

Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom, State Controller John Chiang and Insurance Commissioner David Jones issued a joint statement calling for a resumption of negotiations. To the workers they declared: “While the compensation increases you are seeking may seem fair to you given the length of time workers have gone without a raise and other sacrifices, you must recognize the need of government at all levels to balance rising employee costs with the imperative of providing crucial transportation, health care and safety net services to the people of California.”

BART management is offering a pay raise of 2 percent each year—less than the rate of inflation. Much of this increase, moreover, is conditioned on unlikely benchmarks being met. Management is also pushing for significant increases in pensions and health care contributions, resulting in an effective cut in wages of 6 to 7 percent.

The state officials postured as critics of both sides,

calling on BART management to address the safety concerns raised by workers.

In its response to the letter, SEIU Local 1021 said nothing of the demand that workers give up their wage demands, while stressing that they were eager to return to the bargaining table. “We appreciate your recognition of the legitimate safety concerns raised by workers and the weakness of the District’s offer,” union officials wrote.

This was a signal that the union is looking for some sort of nominal concession on safety issues as part of a deal that would accept management’s wage and benefit demands.

The unions are working deliberately to isolate the strike. ATU workers in the AC Transit system are also without a contract, but the union has refused to call a strike. Instead, service has been increased to make up for the shutdown of BART. Oakland city workers in the SEIU, also without a contract, held a one-day strike on Monday, but on Tuesday were sent back to work by the union.

Also Tuesday, American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSMCE) Local 3993, which includes 200 supervisory and professional workers in BART, announced an agreement with management and instructed their members to return to work.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers at the picket lines. Many maintenance workers in BART face unsafe or unsanitary conditions. Their wages have been frozen since the last contract, when the SEIU and ATU agreed to \$100 million in cuts.

Ted, who works in the elevator and escalator division, explained, “The cost of everything is going up but we’re making the same or less. Personally I’m doing alright, but there are a lot of us living paycheck to

paycheck.

“I think the economy is stronger than it was four years ago when we accepted all these concessions, but they still want us to pay more. If they want us to pay 7 percent into our pensions they need to start giving us raises.”

Ted also spoke about the safety conditions. “They closed down all the bathrooms in the BART stations after 9/11. I’m sure they could have found a safe way to open the bathrooms sometime during the past 12 years, but they’ve kept them closed.

“Now the elevators are just moving urinals. The Systems Service Department and us are constantly having to deal with feces, and it’s just not safe.”

A worker in the information technology department said that even their conditions weren’t safe. “We’ve got hallways barely two people wide half full of old computers stacked chest high.”

Other workers mentioned that several maintenance tunnels are effectively unlit, and two workers have been hit by trains in the past decade.

Wesley, another BART employee said, “Personally it would be devastating if they cut my medical benefits. I have a disabled son who’s my dependent for life. Every dollar they take from our health care coverage is going to come immediately out of my pocket.

“It can also be real tough if you don’t have enough money for health care. Last February I had heart surgery. My condition could have been fatal, and if my benefits had been cut they would have said ‘Let’s wait and see’ instead of operating.”

While BART workers face deteriorating conditions with old equipment, the situation for managers is much better. According to Wesley, “Our managers are cold and callous. They get raises and bonuses, they get ‘training conferences’ in Las Vegas, but they still say there’s no money for us to keep our health care. “You go into some of their offices and they have big mahogany desks and get BART to buy them the new iPhone 5s because they don’t like their Blackberries.

“I’m concerned about wages and health care with this strike, but there’s so much else that’s wrong with BART. We’re running old cars. They keep saying they’re setting money aside for improvements but there’s a lot of corruption. “It’s the same kind of thing across the country. They say there’s a recovery going on, but where’s all that money going. Most of us aren’t

reaping any benefits from this ‘recovery.’”

Everyone who spoke to the WSWS felt that the BART strike should be joined by the AC Transit workers who have also been without a contract since midnight Sunday.

According to Wesley, “Us workers all have the same fight, but the unions keep us separate. The city workers, the bus drivers, all of them, our fights should be together.”

Another worker said that before their contracts expired, 200 bus drivers for AC Transit attended their rally. Most people at the picket agreed that the bus drivers want to join the strike.

In general the BART workers felt public opinion was on their side despite the smear campaigns in the media. According to Ted, “I see a lot of support from AC Transit people, from the fire department, from the general public. For every person who comes by to yell at us there’s at least two or three who express support.”



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