

Unions prepare to shut down Bay Area, California transit strike without a contract

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The unions representing striking Bay Area transit workers are preparing to shut down the strike, now in its fourth day, before a contract is signed.

According to workers who spoke to the WSWS, the unions are attempting to shut down the strike down by the July 4 holiday, today. The unions are currently holding secret negotiations with management to arrive at a tentative agreement. Once a tentative contract is reached, the unions intend to call off the strike and quickly return everyone to work.

Negotiations resumed earlier this week after the intervention of top Democratic Party state officials, who denounced workers for demanding significant wage increases and called for a quick end to the strike.

To facilitate the betrayal, the unions have imposed an embargo on union members from discussing any contract negotiations, past or present. When WSWS reporters attempted to speak to striking workers, a communications director for the union insisted on supervising the conversations—going so far as stopping a worker from responding to a question about the potential consequences of the cuts being promoted by management.

The 2,400 workers at the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system went on strike on Sunday at midnight after negotiations broke down between the unions and management. Talks were reopened Tuesday evening and continued on Wednesday. The BART workers, represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1021 and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1555, have received no strike pay.

In their last offer, BART presented a meager pay raise of two percent annually over the next four years, the length of the new contract. However, this small increase would not even match the rate of inflation.

Moreover, it is partially dependent upon ridership increases and achieving other unlikely fiscal benchmarks. Transit workers have not seen a single pay raise in the past five years.

BART management is also calling for workers to increase their contributions to health care, which is currently set at a flat rate of \$92 per month, and pensions. BART workers, who are not eligible for Social Security because they do not pay into the system, had already agreed in 1991 to surrender 1.6 percent of their payroll over the next twenty years in order to improve their pension benefits. According to the ATU, a retiring station agent with 22 years of experience would bring in a monthly pension of \$2,100—just over 200 percent of the poverty rate for a single individual.

Most of the media coverage of the strike has highlighted the inconvenience it has caused passengers, along with its economic and environmental impact. News reports continue to smear the workers as selfish and overpaid, while ignoring the high cost of living in the Bay Area.

An average pay for a BART employee is about \$60,000, barely sufficient to get by in the Bay Area with its high cost of living.

A report released in 2011 by the Insight Center for Community Economic Development noted that a family of four in the nine counties that make up the Bay Area would need to earn at least \$73,964 annually to meet basic needs without public, private, or informal assistance—the so-called Self-Sufficiency Standard. The report notes that this figure has risen by 18 percent since 2008, when it stood at \$62,450. Most of this surge was based upon increases in the costs of child care (up 21 percent), health care (35 percent), and transportation and housing (13 percent).

The wages provided to transit workers vary by department. The WSWs spoke to a worker in the Utility Department who wished to remain anonymous. He said that their average income is around \$42,000. Living in the Bay Area, about half of this income goes toward rent. Safety is another major concern, especially when utility workers have to work around uncovered rails and risk electrocution. When asked about ending the strike, he was emphatic: “We should not work without a contract.”

“There’s no question that our workers are highly skilled and dedicated,” said BART General Manager Grace Crunican in a June 11 press release that has since been removed from the BART web site. “But they’ve got to take a greater stake in the financial future of BART. We’ve got to normalize our employees’ pay and benefits to bring them in line with the rest of the Bay Area if we’re going to keep BART running for another 40 years.”

Crunican is paid an annual salary of \$316,000. Her predecessor, Dorothy Dugger, who was pressured to resign over two years ago, continued to pull in a gross salary of \$333,000 by using up her nearly 80 weeks of accrued vacation time. When news of the executive’s lavish vacation benefits was revealed in June, Dugger said, “I think BART’s track record on fiscal management is quite solid.”

Transit workers are ready to fight for their interests, indicated by the overwhelming support for a strike authorization. However, the unions, tied to the Democratic Party, are seeking to isolate the workers and ensure that the strike does not become a larger struggle among the working class.

On Monday, Oakland city employees, also represented by the SEIU, joined the transit workers in a one-day strike. This was designed to allow the workers to let off steam and give the appearance of solidarity.

The AC Transit workers, who bus commuters back and forth across the bay, have also been working without a contract since midnight on Sunday, but their union (ATU Local 192) has refused to go on strike with the BART workers, insisting on continuing negotiations instead. In essence, the trade unions are acting strike breakers for the workers they claim to represent.

On Tuesday, workers represented by the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSMCE) Local 3993, whose contract also expired on

Sunday night, went back to work with a contract in which the workers would have to pay more for their health insurance and would receive a measly two percent raise annually over the next two years.

The tactic of calling a strike and then quickly ending it before a contract is approved by the membership—and even before a tentative agreement is reached has become a standard practice of the unions. During the Verizon strike in 2011, the unions ended a two-week strike without an agreement, with a concessions contract eventually imposed 14 months later.

The unions function not as workers organizations, but arms of management, interested solely in maintaining their privileges and dues base from their members. Any genuine struggle among the working class will require breaking from these sclerotic organizations and forming rank-and-file committees based upon a socialist political program.



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