

Lessons of the BART strike

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After four days, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) shut down the strike by more than 3,000 Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) workers with absolutely nothing gained by workers. Even though the unified struggle by BART workers led to the shutdown of the fifth-largest transit system in the US, they were forced to return to work July 5 without even attaining a new contract.

Despite the best efforts by the news media, BART management and state and local politicians to smear the strikers as selfish and indifferent to the public, the strike was not defeated because it lacked popular support. On the contrary, there are millions of workers in Northern California and around the country facing similar attacks on their jobs, pensions and health care benefits.

The main obstacle to mobilizing this support came from the ATU, the SEIU and other unions. Deeply integrated in the corporate and political establishment—and fully in agreement that the working class must pay for the economic crisis—the unions sabotaged the strike before it could develop into a movement that could challenge the Democratic Party and their program of austerity.

BART workers went on strike over basic issues. After having their wages frozen since the financial crash of 2008, workers were looking for an increase above the inflation rate. The five-year wage freeze has amounted to an eight percent pay cut since 2008.

Workers were also opposed to pensions and health care concessions demanded by BART. At the same time, they wanted a series of safety improvements that would improve the system for both passengers and employees.

All of these issues are important especially given the high cost of living in the Bay area. A 2011 study estimated the cost to support a family of four in the Bay area had increased nearly 19 percent since 2008, to \$74,341. The average income of a BART worker, however, is just over \$60,000. Every concession, and every year of stagnant wages, is a significant blow to workers' standard of living.

The BART workers voted to strike to secure reasonable wages, but even their modest demands were too much for the corporate and financial elite in the Bay Area, and the

politicians and union leaders who serve them. This in a metropolitan area that is home to Google, Apple, Oracle, Facebook and Intel, and 47 of the billionaires on Forbes Richest 400 People in America list. The first five Bay Area billionaires alone have an estimated worth of \$100 billion.

One day into the strike, Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom, State Controller John Chiang and the California Insurance Commissioner Dave Jones, all Democrats, issued an open letter calling for the resumption of contract negotiations. They chastised the unions for requesting raises that ran against “the need of government to balance rising employee costs.”

In response, SEIU Local 1021 stated that they shared the politicians' “concern with the suspension of bargaining at BART.” Nowhere did the union defend the call for raises or criticize any of the concessions demanded by management or the Democrats. That is because the unions agree that workers must sacrifice everything while the profits of the corporations and personal fortunes of the billionaires go unscathed.

Across the board the Democrats have been cutting the wages and benefits of public employees. Using the specter of “unfunded liabilities,” the Democrats have particularly attacked pensions. The “reform bill” signed by Governor Jerry Brown in 2012 raised the retirement age for public employees from 55 to 67.

The role of the California Democrats—who also enjoy a supermajority in both houses of the state legislature—demonstrates that whatever their minor tactical differences, the Democratic Party defends the interests of the wealthy just as ruthlessly as their Republican counterparts. While the Republicans tend towards a more confrontational approach with the unions, the Democrats prefer to rely on their services to achieve the same goals.

The SEIU and ATU had no intention to wage a serious fight. Even before the strike began, union leaders appealed to leading Democrats to prevent it. The ATU requested that Governor Brown enforce a 60-day “cooling off” period. Brown, however, refused to prevent the strike at the behest of the BART administration, relying instead on the unions to sell the struggle out.

For their part, the union officials called the walkout to dissipate the militancy of workers while they worked behind the scenes to smother it. BART employees had voted overwhelmingly in favor of a strike, with SEIU members voting 98.5 percent in favor and 99.9 percent of ATU members backing a walkout. Once the strike began, BART management was incapable of effectively replacing the specialized BART workers with scabs, or holding out long against a determined strike. A conservative estimate of the daily cost of the BART strike was \$73 million.

From the very beginning, the unions did everything they could to isolate the struggle. During the strike the contracts of two decisive sections of Bay Area workers, represented by the same unions, expired at the same time as the BART workers. This included Oakland city workers—members of SEIU Local 1021—who were ordered to continue to work without a contract.

Even more strategically, workers at AC Transit, the East Bay bus system, who are represented by the ATU, saw their contract expire. With a daily ridership of 174,000, a combined strike of BART and AC Transit workers would have shut down much of the San Francisco Bay Area. Instead, the ATU agreed to run more buses for AC Transit, effectively scabbing against BART workers.

As one SEIU worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “If AC Transit and BART went on strike together, it would be heard around the world. This situation would be resolved tomorrow.”

The return to work without a new contract or even any reduction of the concessions demanded by management was not the result of a weak position. The walkout was ended right at the moment that it was having its greatest impact, with the unions essentially snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. This was the result of a deliberate political decision by the unions in coordination with leading Democratic politicians.

Any fight to defend BART workers’ wages, pensions, or benefits brings them into immediate conflict with the Democrats who insist on budget reductions, privatizations and lower labor costs. When workers enter into struggle, the unions have shown time and time again that they are on the side of the corporate and political establishment, not the workers.

This has been demonstrated repeatedly over the last three decades in the US and around the world. This was shown most recently in the betrayal of the Verizon strike in 2011 by the Communications Workers of America and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the sellout by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) of the 2012 strike by 28,000 teachers against Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Obama’s reactionary “school reform” agenda.

These experiences demonstrate the politically criminal role of organizations like the International Socialist Organization and publications like *Labor Notes*, which insists that workers abide by the authority of these anti-worker organizations. The ISO and other pseudo-left groups, which have in recent years gained leadership positions in several unions like the CTU and the SEIU, have worked might and main to block a rebellion by workers against these rotten organizations and maintain the political domination of the working class by the Democratic Party.

Far from responding to the pressure of workers by taking up a struggle, as the ISO and *Labor Notes* claim, the more workers challenge the prerogatives of the corporate and financial elite, the more the unions and their pseudo-left supporters function as a labor police force to suppress the class struggle and impose the demands of the capitalist class.

The experience of the BART strike underscores once again that workers must break free from the straitjacket of the trade unions and build new organizations of struggle—independent of the unions and the Democratic Party—to unify their struggles and defend the social and democratic rights of all workers.

Above all, a new leadership of the working class is needed, to fight to unite every section of workers and young people in a political struggle to break the grip of the capitalist class and reorganize economic and political life along socialist lines to meet human needs, not private profit. This includes a massive outpouring of resources to guarantee high quality and affordable mass transit, and secure and well-paying jobs to the workers that provide it.

We call on BART and other workers to study the program of the Socialist Equality Party and make the decision to join our party and build it as the new revolutionary leadership of the working class.



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