

California governor intervenes with union support to prevent BART strike

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On Sunday night, California Governor Jerry Brown intervened in contract negotiations between Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) management and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), blocking a strike that was set to begin after midnight.

Brown ordered a seven-day hiatus during which there would be no strike or lockout, while a team appointed by himself would investigate the “threatened strike.”

A month ago, the two unions called off a strike after only four days, despite the success of the walkout in paralyzing BART and impacting the entire Bay Area. The unions ended the strike without having obtained a new contract or any guarantees from management. That betrayal set the stage for Sunday’s events, with the unions clearly relieved and supportive of Brown’s strike-breaking move.

At issue in the contract negotiations are concessions demanded by BART on pensions, health care and wages. BART workers have had their wages frozen since the last contract in 2009, and the demands of BART would leave them with raises below inflation in addition to increased employee contributions to their pensions, resulting in a yet larger effective pay cut.

The BART system carries 400,000 riders daily and its operation is essential for daily commuter traffic between San Francisco and the rest of the Bay Area.

The governor’s official statement justified his move on the grounds that a strike “will significantly disrupt public transportation services and will endanger the public’s health, safety, and welfare.” This amounts to a blanket revocation of the right of BART workers to strike in defense of their jobs and living standards.

The California legal code grants the governor the authority to forbid strikes and lockouts for seven days. The union leaders responded with suggestions that the

investigation will produce results favorable to the workers. These are lies designed to disarm the workers. Nothing can emerge from the calling off of the first strike and a state ban on its resumption other than a pro-management deal that grants all of BART’s major concessions demands.

Brown, a Democrat, has overseen drastic spending cuts and an assault on public employee pensions, including those of BART workers, in the guise of “reform.” Lt. Governor Gavin Newsom stated in an open letter that the wage demands of BART workers were “unreasonable.”

Despite the clear stance of the governor against the workers, union officials are encouraging the myth that Brown is an impartial observer who will take their side. The president of SEIU Local 1021, Roxanne Sanchez, said in a statement, “Our hope is that the governor’s board can show the public how BART has manipulated the process and continued to bargain in bad faith.”

Earlier on Sunday, Sanchez stated that the unions were going to appeal to Newsom to help resolve the dispute, but made no mention of Newsom’s public stance against the workers’ wage demands.

ATU Local 1555 President Antonette Bryant similarly presented the governor’s intervention as a reasonable response to BART’s bad-faith negotiating tactics.

The contract that expired in July was implemented unilaterally by BART management in 2009 and froze wages. In total, it took \$100 million in concessions from the workers, and the unions refused to fight it.

In the lead-up to the expiration of the contract in July, the ATU asked Brown to impose a 60-day ban on strikes to help the union compel the workers to continue working without a contract.

The contracts of two other sections of workers who

pay dues to the SEIU and the ATU expired the same day as the BART contract—Oakland city workers and AC Transit workers. AC Transit is the public bus transportation system in the East Bay, and there is enormous sympathy among the bus drivers for the BART workers. The union leadership is, however, dead set against uniting these struggles.

When the BART workers did go on strike last month, the leadership of the ATU agreed to increase the number of buses running, despite the drivers not having a contract, in order to weaken the BART strike.

Every step of the way, the SEIU and ATU have done everything in their power to prevent an effective struggle against the concessions demands. The unions are well aware that a strike of any significant duration would bring workers into conflict with the Democratic Party, with which the unions are allied and on whose support the union officials depend for their bloated salaries and perks.

The only way for BART workers to defend their wages and pensions is to unite with AC Transit workers and others in a common industrial and political struggle against Brown and the local politicians of both big business parties.



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