

Bay Area bus drivers sold out by union

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Late Tuesday night, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) called off the strike scheduled for Wednesday morning and announced that it had agreed to a new contract with AC Transit (ACT) the public bus system for the East Bay in Northern California. The ATU represents bus drivers, dispatchers, maintenance workers, and clerical staff at AC Transit, which has a daily ridership of approximately 180,000.

AC Transit workers have been without a contract since the beginning of July. At stake in the negotiations were workers' demands for higher wages and ACT's demand for concessions on health care contributions. According to one driver, the transit workers have not had an effective raise in 15 years.

The final deal agreed to by the union leaders and management includes a 9.5 percent raise over three years and employee contributions to health care that rise to \$180 a month in the third year. For a worker who makes the average income of \$55,000 this would mean a net loss over the life of the contract. The average three year inflation rate in the US has stayed above eight percent for the past several years and the increased health care contribution amounts to a 3.5 percent wage cut for the average worker.

AC Transit workers have clearly shown their willingness to fight for a better deal, but they have been held back by their union. Before the contract expired, ATU members voted 97.4 percent in favor of a strike. The contract expired on July 1, the same day that BART workers, also represented by the ATU, saw their contracts expire. In the face of widespread support for a common struggle by BART and ACT workers, the ATU leadership refused to let the two groups go on strike at the same time.

At the time the ATU local 192 stated, "We are standing with BART brothers and sisters, and we will not cross picket lines anywhere. Our contract is a separate contract, negotiated separately, with a separate

employer. But our solidarity is strong and our mission is the same: respect for workers and quality transit service."

The ATU demonstrated what they considered "solidarity" by agreeing to increase bus service during the BART strike, essentially pushing their members to act as strikebreakers. During the strike AC Transit workers repeatedly complained that their union was not giving them information on contract negotiations and that they were not being respected at union meetings.

To stem growing discontent among their members the union announced last Monday that it intended to strike Wednesday morning. Rather than actually follow through with the strike, the union leadership accepted an offer that was substantially the same as the management had proposed before the strike notification.

The ATU waited until after the California governor had stepped in to prohibit a BART strike before announcing their own labor action. The last thing the ATU leadership wanted was any kind of combined strike which would have immediately brought the unions into conflict with public officials in the Democratic Party.

Together, AC Transit and BART workers are essential for the functioning of the entire San Francisco Bay Area economy. They facilitate the daily commute of hundreds of thousands of workers. A joint strike by both groups of workers could be immensely powerful.

California state governor Jerry Brown, a Democrat, has fiercely slashed budgets and championed public pension "reform," which amounts to an end to defined benefit plans and an across-the-board assault on benefits. Brown and the Democratic Party enjoy the full-throated support of the unions, which function to block any opposition developing among workers to these policies.

The fact that the ATU leadership felt the need to

announce a strike they had no intention of conducting points to a growing militancy of their membership. During the BART strike workers repeatedly told the *World Socialist Web Site* that if AC Transit and BART struck together, “that would be a shot heard round the world,” and “management would fold in a day.”



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