

Sixty-day strike ban ending for northern California transit workers

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Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) workers in Northern California may go on strike again after a 60-day court injunction expires Thursday at midnight. The injunction was issued in August at the request of the BART administration and with the support of the unions on the grounds that a strike would “cause significant harm to the public’s health, safety and welfare.”

The BART system carries around 400,000 daily riders throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. The majority of its employees are in the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1021 and Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1555. The leadership of both unions supported the injunction and have signaled their desire to keep their members working with or without a contract.

At the beginning of the week the union negotiators announced that they were \$30 million away from an agreement with BART management, while management said their positions were still \$89 million apart. The main sticking points are concessions on health care contributions and wages. Under the last public proposal of the BART system, workers would end up with effectively lower compensation when inflation was factored in.

The union leaders declined to give the customary 72-hour notice of a strike Monday night. ATU local president Antonette Bryant told the press it was important to not threaten a strike because “we want to leave every opportunity open to try to get this deal done.” Bryant further made an appeal to the BART board of directors to become more involved in the negotiations, complaining that “they’ve stood on the sidelines.”

The BART board of directors has made clear they are pulling out all the stops to break any strike that might occur. They have already paid a deposit to charter 200

buses to carry commuters and have announced that managers are training to keep some trains running during a strike.

The president of the BART board of directors, Tom Radulovich, told reporters that management was unlikely to increase the amount budgeted for contracts and complained that workers had “huge expectations that we can’t afford.” The question he posed to the union leaders was “Can you bring your members back to Earth?”

A strike of BART workers, like the one that happened in the summer, would effectively shut down the most important public transportation system in the region. Even with concerted scab efforts, there is no effective alternative for the 400,000 daily riders. In addition, workers in the main bus service in the East Bay, AC Transit, with around 175,000 riders, are currently without a contract.

Any joint action by the two groups of transit workers would send local and state governments into a crisis. It was precisely to prevent this, and to defend their political allies in the Democratic Party, that the union leadership quickly shut down the last strike and is so opposed to carrying out a new one. Both the SEIU and ATU have continued to publicly support Democratic politicians like Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom who have come out openly against BART workers’ wage demands.

Before the last contract expired, SEIU members had voted 98.5 percent and ATU members 99.9 percent in favor of a strike. Simultaneously, the contract at AC Transit with ATU Local 192, the main bus service on the east side of the Bay expired. Rather than prepare for a strike, the ATU leadership actually begged Democratic Governor Jerry Brown to ban them from striking.

While BART workers went on strike when the contract expired July 1, the ATU refused to call out AC Transit workers despite a 97.4 percent vote in favor of striking and widespread support for BART workers among the AC Transit employees. Instead, the union agreed to intensify their schedule and run more buses during the BART strike.

On July 5, the SEIU and ATU called off the BART strike without any agreement or even shift in the stance of management. At the time, the unions claimed that now BART would negotiate seriously. The unions announced a new 30-day negotiating period, and when that ran out they encouraged Brown to order the currently ending 60-day injunction against any strike.



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