

Unions delay strike for Northern California transit workers

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On Thursday night a 60-day court injunction against any strike by Northern California Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) workers ended. Representatives of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) announced that they will tell their members to continue working without a contract, and that the earliest a strike could occur is Sunday at midnight.

A statement by the union negotiators just before the injunction expired cited the presence of BART Board members at the negotiations and “Bay Area legislative leaders who agree on the need to avoid a strike,” as a good reason to continue negotiations.

At the same time, the president of ATU Local 1555, Antonette Bryant, said “there was no significant movement” in the day’s negotiations. A spokesman for BART applauded the fact that “the trains will be running while we continue to negotiate.”

At stake in the negotiations are wages, the level of health care contributions, and numerous safety hazards confronting workers. The BART Board of Directors hopes to switch worker health care to more basic coverage and require employees to pay extra for more extensive coverage for their families.

The last contract agreed to by the union leadership was imposed without negotiation by the Board of Directors and included \$100 million in concessions. Since 2009, workers have only received a one percent cost of living increase, which effectively amounts to a 10 percent pay cut with inflation. When the new contract came up for negotiation, over 98 percent of BART workers in both unions voted to authorize a strike.

When the contract first expired in July, the unions called off an initial strike after only four days on the grounds that the BART administration would now

“negotiate seriously.” The SEIU and ATU told their members to keep working under a self-imposed 30-day negotiation extension, and when that expired they asked Democratic Governor Brown to impose a 60-day ban on a transit strike.

During negotiations, the union leaders have limited their demands to getting more politicians and sections of BART management involved. SEIU local president Roxanne Sanchez called for more involvement from Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom after he issued an open letter opposing the workers’ demand for a wage increase.

The unions have also worked to shift public opinion against a possible strike. During the court hearing to decide on the injunction, the ATU argued that a strike would “cause significant harm to the public’s health, safety, and welfare,” and the SEIU raised no objection.



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