

California Bay Area transit workers strike delayed for at least one more day

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A strike by California Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) workers was postponed once again Tuesday morning, as the unions involved seek to reach a concessions agreement with management. Negotiations are to continue as trains run on Tuesday.

There are nearly 2,400 mechanics, train operators, custodians, and station agents working on BART. According to the last public proposals, the unions and BART are in agreement over increasing pension contributions but have not yet reached a deal on wages and health care contributions.

Management has made clear that they are demanding significant concessions and are not prepared to significantly alter their final offer presented on Sunday. “The money is not going to change,” said BART President Tom Radulovich.

BART serves as the primary public transit system in the greater San Francisco Bay Area, with nearly 400,000 daily riders.

The two main unions involved in negotiations are the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1021 and Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1555. As part of the current round of contract negotiations, BART workers struck in early July. The SEIU and ATU isolated the struggle and called off the strike after only four and a half days, saying that it had forced BART to negotiate seriously.

AC Transit workers in ATU Local 192 have given the customary 72-hour notice to begin a strike on Thursday. AC Transit is the main bus service in the East Bay, with a daily ridership of around 175,000. Simultaneous strikes would shut down the main methods of commuting across the Bay.

The strike threat at AC Transit comes only after the union has repeatedly sought to force through a concessions contract on workers. After isolating the

BART strike, ATU Local 192 leaders accepted a tentative agreement from AC Transit and put it to a vote of the membership, who turned it down two-to-one. A few weeks later, effectively the same offer was again put to a vote and again rejected. Since then, AC Transit workers have been kept working without a contract and, without objection from the ATU, continue to feature heavily in the plans of the BART directors to break any BART strike.

There is clearly a desire among workers for a fight. The members of both main unions voted by over 98 percent to authorize the July BART strike. From the standpoint of the unions, however, the strike was intended to let off steam and dissipate opposition while they continued to pursue negotiations over concessions.

The efforts by workers to oppose the attack on wages and benefits has confronted the united opposition of the media and political establishment. Early into the first strike, Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom issued an open letter alongside other leading state Democrats opposing the compensation demands of BART workers. They stated that workers “must recognize the need of government at all levels to balance rising employee costs” against providing social services.

Meanwhile, Democratic Governor Jerry Brown and a collection of city mayors, like Democrat Chuck Reed in San Jose, have led the way in cutting public employee pensions as part of “pension reform.”

The attack on benefits that BART and AC Transit workers are facing is part of a broader trend, including the current bipartisan discussions in Washington to cut Social Security and Medicare.

From the very beginning the unions have worked to undermine any possibility of a successful strike. Before the contract at BART even expired in July, the ATU asked Governor Brown to issue a 60-day injunction

against a strike. At the request of BART, the governor refused the request and on July 1 the contracts at both AC Transit bus and BART transit simultaneously ended.

During the struggle, the ATU maintained a strict separation between the struggles of bus and BART workers. So while BART workers went out on strike, the ATU actually agreed to keep their AC Transit local at the bargaining table and run more buses, effectively ordering workers in one Local 192 to scab on Local 1555.

The SEIU and ATU called off the strike without a single change in the demands of the BART directors. Although the strike included the July 4th holiday, which is normally a paid vacation day, the unions did not give their employees any strike pay. After the strike was ended, the courts issued a 60-day injunction against any further action on the grounds that it would “cause significant harm to the public’s health, safety and welfare.”

Representatives of both the ATU and SEIU claimed that the intervention of Brown would help their case and that workers could rely on politicians like Newsom, who was openly against their wage demands, to make BART “negotiate in good faith.”

When the 60-day injunction expired last Thursday at midnight the unions still held off calling a strike, first for three days and then, when that deadline passed Sunday at midnight, for one more day.

Over the past week, the Bay Area media including the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *San Jose Mercury News* have been writing about “pressure” on lawmakers to ban BART strikes. It is entirely possible that the BART directors and politicians are hoping to use the current strike threat as an opportunity to ban strikes altogether.

The developments over the past four months make clear that transit workers are looking for a way to fight. However, a determined struggle is impossible as long as workers remain trapped in the pro-Democratic Party and pro-capitalist trade unions.

The only way forward for BART and AC Transit workers is a political struggle outside the unions. Pensions, health care benefits, and wages cannot be maintained by appealing to the same Democrats and Republicans who are taking them away from other workers across the state and country.

The events of the past four months underscore once

again that a fight can be waged only by breaking free from the straitjacket of the trade unions and building new organizations—independent of the unions and the Democratic Party—to unify the struggles of all workers in defense of their social and democratic rights.



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