With BART struggle looming, Democratic governor halts California bus strike

David Brown
17 October 2013

At the request of management, Democratic Governor Jerry Brown has moved to enforce a 60-day injunction against a strike by workers at AC Transit that was due to start Thursday morning. AC Transit is the main bus service in the East San Francisco Bay Area, serving a daily ridership of nearly 175,000 commuters.

Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 192 had given 72-hour notice that its members would strike, raising the prospect of joint walkout with Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) workers. A joint strike would effectively shut down the main methods of commuting across the Bay for more than a half a million riders a day.

The nearly 2,400 mechanics, train operators, custodians and station agents at BART have grown increasingly angry with their unions--ATU Local 1555 and the Service Employees International Union Local 1021--which have accepted repeated contact extensions, despite a 98 percent strike vote by the members, and have signaled their willingness to impose major concessions on BART workers.

The ATU only threatened to call a strike at AC Transit after its 1,600 members voted down a second contract offer brought back by the ATU on September 25. The last offer would have increased worker contributions to health care while keeping raises roughly in line with inflation. The ATU had forced its members to work without a contract, handing management the club of operating AC Transit to undermine any walkout by BART workers.

With anger against the unions growing in the ranks of both AC Transit and BART workers, Governor Jerry Brown has intervened to block a strike. A 60-day "cooling off period" is being imposed during which a ritual investigation will be carried out into whether a strike would "significantly disrupt public transportation services and endanger the public's health, safety, or welfare."

It is absurd and self-serving for Brown and others to claim that workers—who are fighting to defend their livelihoods--are disrupting services and endangering the well being of the public. This is under conditions in which the Democrats and Republicans in Washington just shut down the government for over two weeks in order to ram through even more cuts in essential programs.

This is the second time Brown has intervened into negotiations of transit workers since the contract of both AC Transit and BART workers expired at the end of May. Both times, the governor has intervened to support the directors' demands and to block the threat of a simultaneous strike at both transit systems.

Before the contract at BART expired last July, the ATU asked the governor to issue a 60-day strike injunction against its own members. Brown refused, relying instead on the ATU to isolate and then shut down a four-day walkout, during which time the union ordered AC Transit workers to effectively scab on their fellow union members at BART. After the strike was ended, the courts issued a 60-day injunction.

Unions negotiating with BART have issued their fifth unilateral strike postponement since the expiration of the injunction last Thursday.

Brown's intervention against the workers comes as no surprise. A concurrent strike of both BART and AC Transit would have an enormous economic effect and Brown is fully in support of the concessions demanded from the workers. As Governor, he has spearheaded the drive for "pension reform" as a means of maintaining a "sustainable budget." In pushing to increase the contributions of AC Transit and BART workers to their pensions and raising their health care premiums, the

© World Socialist Web Site

directors are only carrying out locally the same employee cost reductions that Brown has carried out statewide and Obama is doing nationally.

This sentiment was best expressed in an open letter by leading Democratic state politicians during the BART strike in the beginning of July. The State Controller, Insurance Commissioner and Lieutenant Governor wrote a joint letter reading in part:

"To BART's unions: While the compensation increases you are seeking may seem fair to you given the length of time workers have gone without a raise and other sacrifices, you must recognize the need of government at all levels to balance rising employee costs with the imperative of providing crucial transportation, health care and safety net services to the people of California."

This is a fraud. The Democrats are slashing public employee wages and benefits at the same time they are gutting essential social programs for millions of California residents. These measures have invariably gone hand in hand with tax cuts and other corporate giveaways to the wealthy. The Democrats are crying broke in an area that contains one of the highest concentrations of billionaires on the planet, including 50 Silicon Valley and other corporate tycoons on Forbes Richest 400 list.

The richest 1 percent has captured 95 percent of all the income gains since the supposed recovery began in 2009. Meanwhile the working class continues to suffer a real decline in wages and an unrelenting attack on its pensions, living standards and working conditions.

This only underscores the treachery of the ATU, SEIU and other unions, which support Brown and the Democratic Party, and through them the domination of the corporate and financial elite over society. A struggle to defend transit workers requires a break with these anti-labor organizations, the formation of new organizations of struggle, and the launching of an industrial and political counter-offensive by the working class.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site