

Bay Area, California transit workers strike against wage, benefit cuts

Our reporters
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For the second time in less than four months, 2,400 workers in the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system in Northern California have gone on strike. The BART system transports 400,000 riders on an average weekday, making it the fifth largest public transportation system in the US.

The strike is an expression of deep opposition among transit workers to the demands of BART management, which is backed by the political establishment and media in the Bay Area and California. These demands include significant cuts in health care and pension benefits, along with changes in job rules designed to significantly reduce pay and increase management power.

The unions involved in the negotiations—the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1021 and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1555—have accepted most of management’s demands, including concessions on health care and pensions. From the standpoint of the unions, the strike is aimed at letting off steam in order to push through another concessions contract.

There are indications that the union was prepared to make a deal, but that BART officials introduced new demands at the last minute. Aware that their membership would vote down the contract, a strike was called, even as the unions try to keep it isolated.

“We negotiated, compromised and were ready to get on with a deal,” said Antonette Bryant, president of the ATU local. “Then management walked in and demanded new sweeping powers that would endanger and exploit our workers... These changes would put managers in the position to change the rules for our members day-by-day and shift-by-shift.”

The first strike in July was quickly shut down by the unions, followed by a three-month period of

negotiations agreed by the unions and Democratic Governor Jerry Brown. The second strike was called only after Brown announced a 7-day injunction against a strike by AC Transit workers who operate the main bus service in the East San Francisco Bay Area, with a daily ridership of nearly 175,000 commuters. AC Transit workers are affiliated with ATU Local 192.

During the first strike action by BART workers in July, the ATU assisted in the isolation of the strike by having AC Transit workers continue running buses across the bay. The same process is repeating itself again—with BART officials providing a number of charter buses at East Bay stations and AC Transit providing additional buses.

For the past week, union negotiators have threatened to call a strike five times, only to relent minutes before the deadline.

On Friday, union leaders held a noon rally at the Lake Merritt BART station, attended by about 200 people. The refrain from union officials was that the unions had already made numerous concessions, and that BART management’s “lack of leadership” in negotiating a deal was the problem. At no point was any mention made of the AC Transit workers who have also been working without a contract.

The role of the Democratic Party was mentioned only once by a speaker who praised its involvement in the negotiations. “They are standing strong with you so that when we return to the table we will get the deal we need,” she said. In fact, Democratic politicians, including Brown, have actively sided with management against the workers.

“I have never seen the union work so hard for an agreement,” said one speaker. “Four years ago we gave away \$100 million in concessions, and today all we are asking for is to keep up with inflation.” In fact, with the

changes in work rules demanded by BART, workers will see a significant decline in wages through cuts in overtime, in addition to the increased payouts for health care and pensions.

The WSWs spoke to BART workers and those attending the rally while passing out a statement, “Unite the working class behind Bay Area transit workers!”

Many workers spoke to WSWs reporters on condition of anonymity, fearing reprisals from union officials.

One worker at the rally noted that, just as with the first BART strike in July, the transit workers were not receiving any strike pay. Workers will receive a meager \$25 a week in strike pay only if it lasts more than two or three weeks, he said.

For many workers, the second strike appeared to be a continuation of the first one, which was shut down by the unions with the promise that management would bargain fairly. “This is pretty much a continuation of the first strike,” said one worker. “They never really negotiated so I think of this as the sixth day of our strike.”

One of the key sticking points in the negotiation, noted the worker, was management’s determination to change work rules without discussion or worker input. “If they can change work rules whenever they want, all the problems you see now with safety and delays would be raised exponentially.”

Other workers expressed disgust at the way the unions have been working to isolate them.

“Our international is engaging in a betrayal,” said one ATU worker. “They knew that Brown could enforce those 60-day injunctions, so they intentionally staggered them to keep us separate from AC Transit workers for a full 120 days.

“We need to have united strikes, with other union and nonunion workers. We need to have bus drivers, Walmart employees, teachers, all of them together. When I look at this picket sign, I don’t think we’re just out here for us, I think we’re out here for every worker. We want to inspire them.”

Many workers expressed disgust with the Democratic Party and Governor Brown’s strike injunctions.

“The union is the reason that Brown got elected into office,” Teddi said. “The union just supports the Democrats. Workers have to break with the logic of

voting for the lesser of two evils. Both the Democrats and Republicans are on the side of management. Workers need an independent political party of their own.”



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