

The political issues in the Bay Area, California transit strike

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For the second time in less than four months, Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) workers in Northern California have shut down the fifth-largest public transportation system in the United States.

The strike has once again demonstrated both the social power of the working class and the growing class anger developing throughout the country. The strike has severely disrupted transportation in a major metropolitan area, including San Francisco, as workers fight to oppose cuts in health care and pensions along with changes in work rules aimed at slashing pay, undermining safety and expanding the power of management.

The pressing task facing transit workers is to connect their struggle to the defense of the rights of the working class as a whole. The main obstacle to doing so is the trade unions, which throughout the conflict at BART have worked to sabotage any struggle in order to impose a contract along the lines demanded by management. At the heart of the treachery of the unions is their determination to subordinate workers to the unions' political alliance with the Democratic Party, including California Governor Jerry Brown.

From the standpoint of the ruling class and its political representatives in California, an example must be made of the transit workers. The idea that workers should have the right to decent health care, pensions and wages must be expunged. All of the past gains won by workers in struggle must be destroyed as part of the drive to restructure class relations and transfer wealth to the coffers of the corporate and financial elite.

In defending their rights, transit workers are pitted directly against all the instruments of the state and its auxiliary institutions. Brown, who has presided over sweeping attacks on workers throughout the state, has already issued several injunctions against possible

strikes. The mass media has, predictably, responded to the strike with rage. The major newspaper in the Bay Area, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, has published commentaries demanding that transit strikes be illegalized, a call that has been taken up by both Democrats and Republicans.

Workers are being blackguarded as selfish, unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices, and responsible for harming the public. What contemptible cynicism! The criminals responsible for endless attacks on working people are seeking to place the blame on their victims. The same demands being made of transit workers are repeated for every section of the working class—in California, throughout the country and internationally.

Amidst record corporate profits, a booming stock market and levels of social inequality greater than at any point since the Great Depression, workers are being told there are no resources to maintain wages and benefits. Northern California is home to Silicon Valley and some of the country's wealthiest individuals (e.g., Larry Ellison, with a net worth of \$41 billion; Larry Page, whose net worth is \$25 billion; Mark Zuckerberg, who has amassed \$19 billion). Yet workers making \$60,000 a year in one of the most expensive parts of the country are said to be vastly overpaid.

The offensive against the working class is being spearheaded by the Obama administration. The ruling class and media in Northern California are apoplectic that workers should dare to shut down public transportation in order to defend their rights, yet the political elite in Washington just closed the entire government. The Obama administration and congressional Democrats and Republicans are stoking up a crisis atmosphere in order to create the conditions for slashing trillions of dollars from Social Security, Medicare, food stamps and other vital programs.

Obama has lent his support to efforts by city and state governments across the country to slash social programs and workers' benefits. In Detroit, the White House has thrown its weight behind the efforts of Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr to utilize the bankruptcy courts to facilitate the destruction of city workers' pensions and health benefits. The banks and bondholders are demanding a fire sale of the city's assets, including the artworks at the Detroit Institute of Arts, to pay off the debt.

Most striking has been the lack of organized opposition to these attacks. The working class has no political voice. In this, the trade unions play the central role. Where they cannot prevent a struggle from breaking out, they do whatever they can to isolate it, smother it and ensure its defeat.

The events in the Bay Area over the past several months are a case in point. When the transit workers' contract ended last summer, the unions at BART—the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU)—called a strike only because they knew that management's demands would be overwhelmingly rejected by the membership. They hoped a short walkout would serve to let off steam.

Nothing was done by the unions to mobilize broader popular support and the strike was called off after just four days with no contract and no changes in management's position. For the past three months, discussions have proceeded under the supervision of a federal mediator. The unions have taken the opportunity to agree to almost all of BART's demands, including cuts in health care and pensions.

In the present strike, the unions intend once again to isolate the workers in order to create the conditions for forcing through a rotten contract.

Workers are striving to fight back. The BART strike is one expression of social discontent that is building up throughout the country and internationally. Earlier this month, Boston school bus workers engaged in a one-day wildcat strike that was met with ferocious opposition from the political establishment and the unions.

If the BART strike is to be carried forward, it must be based on a new political perspective. This means taking the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the trade unions through the establishment of independent rank-

and-file committees. An urgent appeal must be issued to all transit workers and the broader public to prepare a united struggle and counter the lying propaganda of the mass media.

The struggle is a political conflict with the Democratic and Republican parties, the two parties of big business. The politicians—from the state legislature, to Governor Brown and Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom, to the Obama administration—are not neutral arbiters, but representatives of the ruling class, determined to make workers pay for an economic crisis they did not create.

The attack on workers in the US and around the world is a product of the capitalist system, which is based on the enrichment of the corporate and financial elite at the expense of the vast majority of the population. The defense of the rights of workers poses the necessity for the working class to build an independent political movement, take political power, and restructure society on the basis of social need, not private profit—that is, on the basis of socialist policies.



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