

Two workers killed by management-run train during Bay Area transit strike

David Brown
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Two workers conducting maintenance were struck and killed by a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) train in Northern California on Saturday.

Thousands of workers in the Service Employees Industrial Union (SEIU) and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) are striking against demands for cuts in pensions and healthcare and changes in work rules aimed at slashing overtime pay and increasing management control.

The deaths make clear that in the midst of the strike, BART management is seeking to carry out work with operators who are not sufficiently trained. While there are no trains running to carry traffic, BART has been shifting trains for maintenance purposes. The train that struck the workers was being run by a manager who was a driver 20 years ago.

Neither of those killed over the weekend has been identified by name. One was reportedly a nonunion contract worker, while the other was part of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). Despite not having a contract, AFSCME, which includes mid-level managers, has not gone on strike.

Radio transmissions from the time of the accident show that there was confusion and miscommunication over the location of workers on the tracks. BART communications workers are currently on strike, and it is unclear who was running the dispatch center at the time.

These two deaths bring the total number killed in the 41-year history of BART to eight. The last worker killed, James Strickland, was inspecting the track on the same line in 2008 when he was struck by a train.

The federal National Transportation Safety Board has announced an investigation into the incident.

The unions, which are working to find a way of

concluding the strike and pushing through a concessions contract, have refrained from laying any blame on management for the workers' deaths. The ATU announced that it was calling off pickets on Sunday, while the SEIU said it would hold vigils.

In the lead-up to the strike, BART repeatedly threatened to use managers to run a limited set of trains. BART workers have insisted that it would be dangerous to run the system with limited and inexperienced staff.

The BART assistant general manager, Paul Oversier, told the press: "We're dealing with a tragedy. The labor issues are not in the forefront of our mind. This is a tragedy of the greatest proportion for the BART family." The unions similarly said they would not talk about labor issues "out of respect" for the families of those killed.

The workers' deaths take place in the midst of a ferocious smear campaign from Bay Area politicians and news outlets seeking to castigate BART workers as overpaid and selfish. The attack on the transit workers is part of an assault on the jobs and living standards of all workers, throughout California and across the country, backed by both Democrats and Republicans.

Democratic State Senator Mark DeSaulnier has called for a legislative prohibition against BART strikes and received support from other Democratic politicians. Bob Huff, the California Senate Republican Leader, has introduced legislation that would enforce the no-strike clause of the now expired contract.

Meanwhile, the *San Francisco Chronicle* has demanded that "progressive politicians" keep transit running "by any means humanly possible," while approvingly noting that a 2005 New York City transit strike resulted in jail time for a local union president and millions of dollars in fines. In a subsequent article,

the *Chronicle* cited its own editorial as evidence of a growing demand to ban transit strikes.

Shortly after the last strike began in July, the lieutenant governor, the state controller and the state insurance commissioner, all Democrats, wrote that workers “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.” In short, the government budgets will be balanced by taking from workers.

Democratic Governor Jerry Brown has intervened twice on the side of management and imposed 60-day strike injunctions, first against BART workers and more recently against bus workers in the East Bay.

For their part, the unions are committed to their alliance with the Democratic Party and defense of the capitalist system. The unions have already agreed to most of management’s demands, including concessions on health care and pensions. An earlier strike in July was shut down after only four days, without any change in the position of management.

The unions are likewise seeking to quickly end the current strike, which was called with the aim of letting off steam and defusing widespread opposition among workers to management’s demands. The unions have done nothing to mobilize the working class as a whole in defense of the BART workers, or to counter the propaganda from the media.

The *Chronicle* reported on Sunday that the unions and management are in contact with federal mediators to discuss the possibility of a return to the bargaining table. SEIU Executive Director Pete Castelli said that the unions “are in talks with the mediator in hope of reaching an agreement.” The unions are calling for BART management to accept a proposal that would include all the concessions on health care and pensions, while having issues of work rules settled by an arbitrator.

Any agreement along the lines proposed by the union would be intended as a face-saving gesture, allowing the union to declare “victory” and end the strike.



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