

Unions end Bay Area, California transit strike

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Unions and management concluded a deal late Monday evening and ended the strike by 2,300 transit workers in Northern California. The agreement worked out accepts all of the basic demands of Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) management, including major concessions in pensions, health care and work rules.

The unions—the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU)—held a press conference with politicians and BART administrators at 10:00 p.m. to announce the tentative agreement. ATU local president Antonette Bryant stated that they had “reached a compromise” on pensions and health care and adopted “innovative” work rules.

Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom, a Democrat who openly opposed workers’ wage demands, repeated seven times in his short speech, “We won’t let this happen again,” in reference to the transit strike. This can only serve as a threat to workers that whether or not they support the proposed contract, the state will fight to keep them on the job.

Significantly, the unions called off the strike without their members even having a chance to see the terms. Workers still need to vote on the contract for it to be accepted, but both BART and the union leaders declined to give any contract details.

The strike by BART workers, which began on Friday, has given expression both to the growing opposition among workers to ceaseless demands for cuts and givebacks and the social power of the working class. The strike shut down the fifth-largest public transit system in the country, crippling transportation throughout the region.

The political establishment in the Bay Area, both Democratic and Republican, responded with a ferocious campaign launched in coordination with the media, including public discussion of proposals to outlaw strikes altogether. The ruling class is seeking to

make an example of the transit workers as part of its efforts throughout the state and across the country to slash wages, benefits and working conditions.

The ruthlessness of management came to a head on Saturday, when two workers were killed by a train that was being used to prepare replacement workers in the event of a prolonged strike. While BART management initially claimed the train was being moved for maintenance purposes, the head of a federal investigation into the accident confirmed on Sunday that it was in fact being operated by an uncertified trainee.

The unions have collaborated with management and the state in seeking to impose a concessions contract on transit workers. Even before the strike was called on Friday, the unions had agreed to most of the framework proposed by management. This included increased worker contributions to pensions and health care, along with nominal wage increases that barely keep pace with inflation. In 2009, the unions pushed through a contract that included \$100 million in concessions.

When the BART contract ended in July, the unions called a strike and then called it off after only four days, without any change in management’s position. This was followed by a self-imposed 30 day extension and a two-month no-strike period imposed by California’s Democratic governor, Jerry Brown, and the courts.

The unions called the second strike with the aim of letting off steam and dissipating the workers’ anger, the better to push through a sell-out contract. They responded to the deaths of the two workers Saturday by avoiding any suggestion that management was to blame while intensifying efforts to call off the strike.

The meetings on Monday between the unions and management included federal mediator Greg Lim. The San Francisco Chronicle cited a source close to the talks as saying that the two parties involved were only a “half-inch apart” on Monday.

Before negotiations had ended last Thursday night, the unions had offered to accept BART's economic demands and send the question of work rules to binding arbitration.

According to the San Francisco Chronicle, the unions have agreed to most of management's demands on work rules as well. "On Sunday evening," the newspaper reported, "the unions released a proposal that offered to end the dispute by modifying contract language that BART contends has prevented technological advances and enshrined inefficiencies. The union offer proposed to allow for work-rule changes regarding technology but retain rules on safety."

Workers should reject the agreement prepared by the unions, BART management and the corporate and political establishment in California. In order to carry the struggle forward, the strike must be taken out of the hands of the unions through the formation of independent rank-and-file committees. An appeal must be made to workers throughout the region for a common struggle against the dictates of the corporate and financial elite and the politicians of both big business parties.



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