

Driver sickout halts bus service in Detroit

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Bus service in Detroit came to a halt Monday as drivers called in sick or took vacation days to protest intolerable conditions, including assaults on drivers, deteriorating service, overwork as well as cuts to wages, pensions and health care.

Transit service in Detroit, already massively underfunded, has been impacted by severe cuts, including the elimination of 24-hour service, cuts to weekend service and the curtailment of routes. There are some 470 drivers employed by the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT), with about 300 drivers daily carrying some 100,000 passengers.

One of the catalysts for the protest was the recent stabbing of two on-duty DDOT drivers; however, the grievances of drivers span a wide array of issues.

One veteran driver told the WSWs that friction between riders and passengers had escalated due to massive budget cuts. “The people are mad because they have cut so much service. It is insanity.”

Alvin Bell, a DDOT driver with 11 years said, “How do they want us to take a pay cut when we are picking up more people than ever?”

“On the Woodward bus, you go one mile and the bus is already full, standing room only. You pass up people in wheelchairs, everybody. How are you going to pick up 50 people at every major street? I got chased down by a passenger with a gun.”

“How do you expect conditions to get better when there is a lack of service and a lack of drivers? The service is inappropriate. On any major street buses are at full capacity. The driver does not have time to go to the bathroom. There is no lunch stop, no 15-minute breaks.”

Drivers recently rejected a concessions contract proposed by Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr that would have maintained concessions surrendered by their union—the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 26—in 2010 and on top of that would have slashed wages and benefits by a total of 20 percent.

Meanwhile, Orr, who is acting as an unelected financial dictator, is threatening to privatize city services, including

DDOT, which is already operating under the direction of a private management company. In addition, Orr recently announced he was ending city-paid medical coverage for about 20,000 retired city workers, including transit workers. Retirees under 65 will be forced to buy private insurance under the health exchanges set up by the Obama administration while those over 65 are being forced onto Medicare.

More than 200 drivers and their supporters attended a Monday morning rally outside of the City-County building in downtown Detroit. The majority of transit workers saw the need to link their struggle to the broader issues facing the working class in Detroit, and many carried hand-held signs appealing to passengers and calling for expanded service.

While the struggle by transit workers has the potential to win broad sympathy, the Amalgamated Transit Union is advancing as its sole demand the call for police on buses, in effect pitting drivers against passengers. The ATU has disavowed responsibility for the sickout, setting drivers up for victimization, and has rejected any attempt to mobilize transit riders behind the drivers or link the protest to issues of pensions or wages or demands for more funding for transit.

In line with union demands for cops on buses, ATU Local 26 President Fred Westbrook set up an afternoon meeting with Detroit Police Chief James Craig and Kevyn Orr’s Chief Operating Officer and former city councilman Gary Brown.

The ATU demand for police on the buses dovetails with the reactionary campaign by the unions to elect Democratic Wayne County Sheriff Benny Napoleon, who is running as the law-and-order candidate in the Detroit mayoral election.

In contrast to the ATU, drivers at Monday’s rally identified with the plight of the city’s transit passengers and spoke about fighting to expand city services and opposing the looting of the city by Orr and the big banks.

David Brown, a driver with 18 years, was carrying a sign saying “no more long waits.” He said, “Our benefits

are being stripped so rapidly it is hard to keep up. They say they are broke. How are they hiring someone [Orr] and paying him more than \$200,000 a year and we can't get our \$2 raise back that we gave up in 2010? The starting wage here is around \$10 an hour, just above minimum wage. Some people have been here three years and not made it to maximum pay. There is money, but they are hiding it from us.

"We want 24-hour service back. We have people who work late night. We provided that service and they appreciated it. Some have kids at home so they have to work late at night. You have to work the shift you are able to work. Public transportation is needed in this city."

Scherita Joseph, with eight years seniority, said, "I think Orr is here illegally. Detroit does not qualify for bankruptcy. They are here to do as they please." Referring to the former Detroit mayor who was recently convicted on corruption charges, she said, "They are doing what Kwame Kilpatrick did, but only now it is out in the open."

"We are in contract negotiations now with Kevyn Orr. We just voted down a contract that would cut our pay and benefits. They are making it hard for anyone to raise their families. We will no longer be able to afford to live in the city."

Mike James, a driver with two decades of experience, said, "Can you imagine being a retiree? Look at what they are trying to ram down their throats. We need to do what goes on in Europe—a mass strike. Look at San Francisco, at the BART strike, where two workers were killed. There was a report that the train that hit them was being run by a computer. We are all involved in this. We need a general strike with all the county workers involved too."

When a WSWS reporter explained that the unions were seeking to block any united action by city workers against the attacks of the emergency manager Mike replied, "The unions have been transformed into a business, no doubt about it."

Another DDOT driver said, "Good luck trying to find drivers who will do this job for no benefits and no money. They need to keep the economy bad, so we'll work for nothing."

"You're passing 20 people you can't even pick up at every stop. All day the same problem is happening. 'I've been out here for hours', the passengers say to us.

"They cut most of the services and we are the ones taking the blame."

"We don't have the equipment, manpower, and it's going to get worse."

Megan Owens, executive director of Transportation

Riders United, an advocacy group for public transportation, spoke about the impact of recent cuts to service. "This is an impossible situation. The city slashed service in recent years, leading to dramatic overcrowding on buses. A friend of mine waited for 2 ½ hours and the buses never showed up. A woman in a wheelchair was passed up by three different buses in a row. It is outrageous, especially when they are providing an essential service. 100,000 people a day rely on the buses to get to school, to work and to doctors. Those 100,000 people have no choice. There is nothing they can do."

Michael Cunningham, who described himself as transportation "activist," said, "At every terminal there are 100 buses that are broken down. One-half of the fleet is down. They need parts. People are being made late to court, to school, to work. The drivers and the passengers are upset. It is like lighter fluid and a match. It is combustible."

A city worker with eight years said he had come to support the drivers. "Everybody needs to be united together. That way they wouldn't be able to railroad us. If every union stuck together we would be better off. The whole city needs to strike together, everybody."

Lemarr, a retired Detroit firefighter, also came out to support the drivers. "We need some solidarity down here. One piece here and one piece there will not do it."

He explained what was happening to city retirees. "They have tagged us very badly on health care. I've got to go into the health exchanges. They are giving you a stipend. You have to pay for your own dental and optical. My wife works for the city, but they will not let me go on her health coverage."



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