

California Bay Area transit workers speak out on strike

Our reporters
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Monday marked the fourth day of the strike by thousands of workers in the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system.

Throughout the duration of the strike, workers have faced attacks from the political establishment and the corporate media, and have had their struggle isolated and undermined by the unions, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1021 and Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1555.

On Saturday, two maintenance workers were struck and killed by a BART train. The trains were being moved for maintenance purposes, but the operators did not have sufficient training and a miscommunication over the location of the workers led to the tragedy. The deaths brought the total fatalities in the 41-year history of the BART facilities to eight.

A team of WSWS reporters spoke to striking transit workers on the picket lines. Like earlier interviewees, workers asked to remain anonymous in order to avoid reprisals from union officials.

Safety issues have been a major concern expressed by striking transit workers. "All of the lighting underground is very poor. Even with reflector vests it can be tough to see someone in an underground tunnel," observed one worker.

Workers placed the responsibility of the deaths of the two workers on BART management, including Grace Crunican, BART general manager, and Tom Hock, BART's chief negotiator.

"You're supposed to be certified to drive the trains, but I bet you the manager driving wasn't," said a transit worker. It has since emerged that a trainee replacement worker was driving the trains at the time of the deaths.

"Grace and Tom have blood on their hands. We told them it wasn't safe to run the trains without us, but

read the news. They keep saying they might as well automate it, that a trained monkey could do the work. Well, I guess our managers aren't even as good as trained monkeys."

BART management also wants more control over workplace rules. "They want to be able to change any work rule they want without discussion. It's not about efficiency, they want to be able to punish and fire us however they want," said another worker. "Work rules protect us."

As with the previous strike in July, the transit workers have received no strike pay. One worker told the WSWS, "There was a proposal a while back to make a strike fund for us, but we voted it down. None of us trusted the union to actually give us money if there was a strike."

The trade unions have largely given in to management's demands, including concessions on health care and pensions. This comes just four years after the BART workers accepted a concessions contract in 2009.

"Sadly, we agreed to it," explained one worker, referring to the 2009 contract. "They said take zeros now to get BART through a tough time, and if ridership goes up you'll get rewarded later. Now our ridership is higher than ever, and they're telling us, 'We'll give you a raise, but you've got to pay more for benefits and pensions.'"

BART workers are not eligible for Social Security, so they depend completely upon their pensions.

"Our medical costs are already going to go up every year for the next 30 years. What they want is for us to cover our entire health care and pensions. That's their goal, slowly getting rid of all our retirement and health care until we're responsible for buying our own private plans."

Many BART workers emphasized that other workers in the region are facing the same program of austerity.

“We’re not the only ones being hit,” said one transit operator. “Look at San Jose, look at Brown’s ‘pension reform.’ They want workers fighting between themselves over who gets the biggest benefits, all while they’re taking away everyone’s benefits.”

“I hope people think of their own jobs when they see us out here.”

The SEIU and ATU have worked to systematically isolate the strike and have refused to appeal to other sections of the working class who are facing similar conditions. The unions, tied politically to the Democratic Party, have limited their calls to demanding that BART management “show leadership” and approve the concessions contract.



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