

Lessons of the Bay Area transit strike

Joseph Kishore
23 October 2013

The four-day strike by 2,300 Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) workers in Northern California was called off on Monday night and the nation's fifth largest public transportation system was back in operation yesterday.

While the unions involved—the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU)—have not released details of the agreement, what has been reported makes clear that it accepts all of the basic demands of BART management, including concessions on pensions and health care and changes in work rules to further undermine working conditions. The new contract follows one in 2009 that included \$100 million in concessions and a four-year pay freeze.

It was entirely predictable that the unions would end the strike on management's terms. They followed a script that has been repeated countless times over the past thirty years.

A strike is called that the union has no intention of winning. Rather, it is called to let off steam in order to make it easier to push through concessions. Nothing is done to mobilize broader popular support. The workers are left isolated while the media engages in a slander campaign. The strike is called off as soon as the union deems it feasible, with nothing won and workers ordered back to work before they can read, let alone vote on, the new contract.

The unions are reportedly holding mass meetings and conducting a vote on the contract as early as today, with the aim of giving workers as little time as possible to review what they are voting on. There is widespread opposition among the workers, and with good reason. Many are no doubt asking, if this is the outcome, what was the purpose of the strike?

That the pattern in the BART strike has been repeated again and again points to the fact that the experience of BART workers is part of a broader process. What is involved is not simply a conflict with one institution or

a problem with one set of corrupt union officials. To carry forward the struggle, it is necessary to carefully consider the lessons of what has happened.

The BART strike, like every social conflict that erupts in the United States, quickly exposed the violence of class relations in America and the essentially *political* character of the struggle. In seeking to defend their rights, the transit workers encountered the furious opposition of the state and its institutions. Politicians, both Democratic and Republican, attacked the workers, along with their allies in the media.

Workers who make about \$60,000 a year were denounced as overpaid and greedy. This in a region where the cost of living is among the highest in the country and where some of the wealthiest people in the world reside. Corporations are making record profits, the stock market is soaring, and it is assumed as a matter of course that CEOs and Wall Street investors should be wealthier than ever. But for workers to attempt to maintain a decent standard of living is considered an outrage.

There were immediate calls for direct state action against the strikers. Democrats and Republicans demanded legislation to make transit strikes illegal. The supposedly liberal *San Francisco Chronicle* led the way. An editorial published after the conclusion of the strike fumed, "Why should workers in a service so essential to Bay Area life and safety even be allowed to strike?" It would be better to make any form of social resistance illegal.

These threats were echoed in the comments of California Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom—the former mayor of San Francisco and favorite of "left" Democrats—when he said at the press conference announcing the agreement: "We won't let this happen again."

The determination of the ruling class and its political representatives to defeat the strike led to the killing of

two maintenance workers over the weekend. BART first claimed the train that hit the workers was being operated by an experienced manager, but it has since emerged that the train was being driven by a strikebreaker with little or no experience who was being prepped for the possibility of a lengthy strike.

The ruling class sees the attack on transit workers as a critical component of an overall class policy. Every right of the working class is under attack. Anything that does not contribute to the accumulation of greater personal wealth for the rich must go—health care, pensions, public education, decent wages. In the aftermath of the US government shutdown, the Obama administration is in discussions with congressional Republicans and Democrats over plans to slash hundreds of billions of dollars from Medicare and Social Security.

The struggle of transit workers in defense of their rights is embedded in this broader social and political framework. The working class faces the necessity of counterposing to the worked-out strategy of the ruling class its *own worked-out strategy*, based on its own interests.

The unions function not as instruments of struggle, but as instruments for the suppression of struggle. Their first aim is to prevent any opposition from emerging. Over the past thirty years, strikes, once a constant feature of American life, have largely disappeared, even as social inequality has grown to levels that rival the period before the Great Depression.

When strikes do erupt, the unions work to isolate and defeat them. This has been the case in every struggle since the 1980s, *without exception*. It is impossible to point to a single example during this period of these organizations—upheld today by phony “left” groups as the only legitimate representatives of the working class—leading a struggle to victory.

The bankruptcy of the unions is determined by their social and political relationship to the profit system. The unions, representing the privileged upper-middle class executives that control them, accept and defend the framework of capitalism, expressed politically in their alliance with the Democratic Party. They base themselves on everything the working class is being driven into struggle against.

The agreement that the unions have reached with management must still be voted on, and the Socialist

Equality Party urges workers to reject the sellout.

However, this is only the first step. New organizations of struggle must be built. The task of constructing a new leadership must be initiated, among BART workers and in every section of the working class, throughout the country and internationally. This leadership must be forged in opposition to the Democratic and Republican parties, the trade unions and all of the institutions of the ruling class.

In order to fight, it is necessary to understand what one is fighting against. The defense of every basic right of working people involves a conflict with the ruling class, its state, and the capitalist system. The growing radicalization of broad sections of the population must be given an anti-capitalist and socialist orientation, directed at building a mass movement of the working class to take political power and reorganize society on the basis of social need, not private profit.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact