

After calling off strike, Bay Area transit unions move to push through concessions contract

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One day after calling off a four-day strike by Bay Area California transit workers, the unions involved have begun holding meetings as part of an effort to push through a concessions agreement reached with management.

Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) workers in the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1555 met on Wednesday in Oakland to discuss the proposed contract. The other union involved is the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1021.

The ATU workers were not given copies of the contract, but instead received a four-page synopsis, written by the union executives, listing the changes.

A worker who provided the synopsis to the *World Socialist Web Site* noted that it is written in a deliberately opaque manner. When asked to explain specific points that it contains, he responded that “it’s unclear.”

The summary, which is drafted in lawyers’ language aimed at convincing workers that the union has secured a victory, nevertheless is forced to acknowledge significant concessions. The agreement accepts the entire framework demanded by management, including cuts to health care and pensions and changes to work rules to benefit management.

Worker contributions to pensions will increase one percent each year. However, while management was previously required to match the pension payments made by workers with an increase in base pay dollar for dollar, under the new contract management will contribute only 72.1 percent of the amount workers pay. In effect, BART workers will for the first time be paying into pensions without full reimbursement.

The union leadership has been trumpeting the

contract’s proposed pay raise of 15.68 percent. However, while the pension cuts are implemented immediately, the pay raises are staggered over the contract’s duration of four years. Workers will receive a 3.7 percent increase in 2013-14; another 3.7 percent increase in 2015, and again in 2016. In 2017 the workers will receive a 4.2 percent pay raise.

The increase in pay is more than compensated by the cuts in benefits, which is what management wants. It is also the first stage in undermining the pension system altogether. The changes in pension contributions set the stage for similar attacks on all government workers throughout the state.

Cuts have also been made to retiree health care eligibility, and restrictions have been imposed on overtime pay. Workers will pay significantly more in health care co-payments.

Changes have been made to the wording of many of the work rules, but no specific details are given in the four-page union talking points. The ability to change workers status from full-time to part-time has been made more flexible, although how this will be exercised is not spelled out. The definition of rest breaks has also been changed. One worker speculated that the changed wording might enable management to force employees to work through their breaks.

The tentative agreement was rushed through on Monday night in the wake of revelations from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) relating to the death of two BART workers who were killed by a train over the weekend. The NTSB lead investigator said that the train was being run by an uncertified trainee as part of BART management’s preparation to operate the trains with strikebreakers.

Reporters for the WSWS asked several workers leaving the local union hall about the mood of the meeting. One worker responded, “A lot of us want to vote no, but we’re afraid of the consequences.”

Another worker characterized the meeting as confused. “The terms in the document which the ATU has given us are unclear; it’s hard to make out the significance of much of this.”

Workers in the meeting asked the union executive board why they had called off the strike prior to workers voting on the contract. “They danced around the question,” one worker said. “They avoided it. There was no way they could answer it that would satisfy workers.”

Even before the last contract ended in July, the unions have been working quite consciously to diffuse the overwhelming opposition to management demands and create the conditions for pushing through more concessions. A strike was started in July that was quickly called off after only four days, followed by 90 days of further negotiations. This then led to the strike last week, which was once again called off after only four days.

Throughout the process, the unions have sought to isolate the workers and prevent any struggle from developing into a political struggle against the Democratic Party and the capitalist system.

There is a fear among workers, one told the WSWS, that “if we go out on strike a third time, we’ve as good as hanged ourselves ... We should have stayed out on strike in July.”

At the press conference announcing the end of the strike, California Democratic Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom made clear the position of the ruling class when he repeatedly issued the threat, “We will not let this happen again.” Democratic and Republican politicians have both called for legislation to make strikes by transit workers illegal.

Workers also expressed concern that the ATU members will vote separately from the workers in the SEIU. If workers in one union vote “no,” while the other union succeeds in pushing the contract past its members, the workers voting “no” will be isolated. This is a calculated move on the part of the union to undermine opposition to the contract.

One worker said that the ATU would be holding a second round of discussions, during which it was said

that workers would be presented with a copy of the complete contract. No exact time has been set. A vote on the contract may be scheduled for early next week.



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