

# Unions push for concessions contract for Bay Area, California transit workers

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Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1555 and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1021 have called for Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) workers to vote Friday for the contract negotiated with management, which increases pension contributions and health care costs, and rewrites work rules to benefit management.

The four-day strike by 2,300 Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) workers in Northern California was called off by the union last Monday.

Cuts are being imposed on health care eligibility, while co-payments are increasing sharply. Additionally, the tentative agreement includes significant changes to work rules, including measures to cut back overtime pay.

The vesting period for receiving retiree health care benefits has tripled from five to fifteen years, a measure that the SEIU states in an outline handed out to their workers would “save BART millions of dollars.”

Additionally, workers' 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. As a result, BART workers will for the first time be paying into pensions without full reimbursement.

The deal struck between the union and BART management behind closed doors is part of an ongoing attack on the pay, benefits and working conditions of BART workers that have been carried out over the past two decades. The 2005 contract included sharply-increased health care costs, while the 2009 contract imposed pay freezes and placed a cap on employer benefit contributions.

Each successive contract cut the overall earnings of the workers and worsened working conditions. Despite the contract's limited, staggered pay raise, workers will lose money overall when pension cuts and increased health care costs are taken into consideration.

The tentative agreement was rushed through on the night of October 21 in the wake of revelations from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) relating to the death of two BART workers. 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.

During the four-day strike, the unions worked to isolate the BART workers, seeking to prevent it from developing into a conflict with the political establishment and the unions' allies in the Democratic Party. From the standpoint of the unions, the aim of the strike was to let off steam in order to facilitate the pushing through of a contract that accepts all the basic demands of management.

In the week after the strike, it emerged that BART had been using a safety policy known as “simple approval.” Workers are required “to notify BART's operations control center when they plan to work on or near the tracks,” according to a report from the local ABC station. BART policy was to not notify workers of approaching trains. Workers were “responsible for their own safety” and needed to post a look-out. This, management rationalized, would force workers to be alert.

In the wake of the revelations of the death of the two workers, BART has temporarily suspended its “simple approval” system.

On October 24, BART directors held a meeting to “honor the two dead workers” who were “part of the BART family.” Leaders of the ATU, SEIU and the

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3993 joined the meeting and denounced management—not for running strike-breaking operations which killed two workers, but for not concluding a contract sooner.

One of the two killed workers was a member of AFSCME, which refused to call a strike despite not having a contract.



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