

Directors threaten to reject California transit workers' contract

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The Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) Board of Directors is meeting today and is expected to reject a tentative agreement signed with unions following a four-day strike of transit workers in Northern California in October.

The board is complaining that the contract, which accepts all of management's basic demands, would grant employees up to six weeks of paid family medical leave, and that this provision was signed in error by BART negotiators. The contract has already been ratified by members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

BART is the main public transit system in the San Francisco Bay Area and has a daily ridership of 400,000.

Under the previous contract, employees were given up to twelve weeks of unpaid time off to deal with family medical emergencies, but none of that was paid unless employees used their sick time, floating holidays or vacation days.

The contract that the unions agreed to in October includes significant concessions on pensions and health care and changes in work rules aimed at further undermining working conditions and strengthening the hand of management.

According to BART, the family medical leave provision in the new contract could cost \$44 million over the four-year length of the contract if a third of all workers use all six weeks of paid leave every year. Last year, however, only 171 of the 2,301 members of the SEIU and ATU took family medical leave, and that was for an average of 4.3 weeks. The ATU has said that the provision would likely cost only \$1.4 million a year.

The directors claim that the new provision was rejected multiple times during negotiations but was

then accidentally included by management when preparing the final tentative agreement. The agreement was signed on by BART's top negotiators before being sent to the unions. The unions called off all strikes as soon as there was a tentative agreement and before either their members or the board approved it.

Last Friday the BART board voted 7-to-1 to instruct BART general manager Grace Crunican to return to the negotiating table over the provision. BART board member Gail Murray said that the additional costs of the provision make the contract "not acceptable as is."

Union leaders have made clear that if the contract gets voted down by BART, they will do everything possible to prevent a strike. When asked by a reporter, "What are the chances the trains will stop running?" Antonette Bryant, president of ATU Local 1555, responded, "I don't think there's a chance at all."

BART workers have been without a contract since July 1, when the last contract, which froze wages and contained \$100 million of concessions, expired. Since then, the unions have called two strikes that they worked to keep isolated and shut down as quickly as possible. The aim of the unions was to prevent the anger of workers from developing into a political struggle against the Democratic Party and the capitalist system.

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