

# Milwaukee transit workers strike

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Bus drivers and mechanics working for the Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) began a 72-hour strike early Wednesday, July 1, after working without a contract for two months and overwhelmingly rejecting management's four-year contract offer.

The 750 workers, members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 998, are employed by the private, not-for-profit Milwaukee Transport Services. On Monday, 93 percent of the workers voted against the offer made by management last Friday, with an equal margin voting to strike if no deal was reached during a federally mediated bargaining session on Tuesday.

The three-day strike is the first strike by Milwaukee County Transit System workers since 1978, when a walkout lasted 39 days. MCTS officials announced they would not use managers to replace drivers.

MCTS provides around 150,000 passenger rides a day, with another 20,000 passengers riding buses during the city's annual Summerfest that is currently taking place. In addition to operating transit services in Milwaukee, MCTS is also under contract with Ozaukee County, whose service has also been halted by the strike. Strikers are angered over plans to hire hundreds of part-time drivers, poor working conditions, including the lack of bathroom breaks, stagnant wages and management demands for increased out-of-pocket health care costs. Nevertheless, ATU Local 998 President James Macon claimed the work stoppage "is not about money."

The present contract allows a meager four minutes for a bus driver, at the turnaround point of their route, to find and walk to a business with an available restroom after clearing the bus of passengers. MCTS bus drivers have reported having to go as far as resorting to wearing Depends diapers due to the lack of bathroom breaks and to prevent falling behind schedule on their return route.

Since the 2008 economic collapse, part-time

employment has been used to cut labor costs throughout the economy, including transit systems in major metropolitan areas that have been hit by federal, state and local budget cuts and ever higher debt servicing costs.

Milwaukee County Transit System had not previously relied on part-time bus drivers. Under the MCTS proposal, part-time employees would receive starting pay of \$18.13 an hour and would not be part of the union. In addition, part-time drivers would not receive employer-paid pension or health care benefits.

Current drivers are paid an average hourly wage of \$23.78 or around \$50,000 a year without overtime. Under the contract proposal they would only receive a one percent increase over two years, raising hourly wages to \$24 in 2016 and \$24.45 in 2017.

The transit system claims the average annual earning of a MCTS bus driver is \$63,000. But this would be the case only if he or she worked overtime hours, which were the equivalent of a sixth full time shift per week. The plan to hire several hundred part-time drivers is designed at eliminating overtime pay that are a major source of income for workers and their families.

Under the present contract, bus drivers would continue receiving cost-of-living pay increases of up to two percent each year. However, the new contract would also reduce annual cost-of-living adjustment for pensioners that retire after December 31, 2015 from two percent to one percent.

The rejected contract offer would also change retirement eligibility. The previous contract allowed bus drivers and mechanics to qualify for full pension and health care benefits after 27 years of work. Under the parameters of a new "rule of 85," workers would only be able to retire with full benefits when their number years on the job plus their age equaled 85. This would increase the minimum retirement age by several years for younger workers.

The strike pits workers against Democratic mayor Tom Barrett who has presided over more than a decade of budget cutting since taking office in 2004. Far from opposing the attack on public sector workers, the ATU and other Wisconsin unions have collaborated with the Democrats' austerity program. Barrett failed to unseat Wisconsin's deeply hated Republican governor Scott Walker in the 2012 gubernatorial election despite the best efforts of the unions to promote this right-wing politician as a friend of working people.



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