

San Diego transit strike called off after agreement announced

Our reporters
6 June 2016

Drivers employed by the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) ended their weeklong strike after approving a new contract with their employer, First Transit. The transit workers, members of Teamsters Local 542, went on strike last week after their employer stopped contract negotiations. The drivers had been without a contract since last July.

Terms of the new contract have not been made available by either the company or the union.

Workers have been fighting for raises and affordable medical coverage in addition to a pension, instead of the company's offer of a 401(k). Low wages for bus drivers put many in poverty.

The strike only shut down bus lines that were operated by First Transit, one of many private companies that operate city bus services. The MTS workers on strike chiefly deal with providing "paratransit" services to those who are disabled and not able to move on their own.

The MTS strike followed a four-day walkout by 1,700 San Diego AT&T workers, which was called off by the by the Communication Workers of America (CWA) the day before the First Transit strike began, isolating their struggle from the 39,000 Verizon workers who were striking on the East Coast.

The fact that workers originally rejected a 27-31 percent increase from the company only emphasized the abject poverty wages they received. Even a 31 percent increase on a \$14/hour wage would have amounted to \$18.34/hour. This would remain a poverty wage that would not sustain an individual, much less a family in a city and state that have one of the highest costs of living.

Reporters with the WSWS were able to talk to workers at the picket lines last week. Many expressed their opposition to the company's plans and the

grueling work schedules they are forced into.

One worker who wished to remain anonymous told the WSWS, "I work a 5-and-a-half-hour to 4-hour split shift at work from 5 am to 8:45 pm. When we get home we try to relax, eat, watch 15 minutes of the news, spend time with the family. By that time it's a quarter past ten and you have to get up at 4 am."

He added, "People are dealing with 4-and-a-half hours sleep. Can you still work safely? You have to. I got more sleep driving a semi-truck than driving a city bus."

On the city's high rent costs he said, "It's outrageous. People don't live where they want to. That cuts into your paycheck with gas and your commute." He added, "The people who are telling you, 'you can do this,' are the same people who are buying a house and making 10 times as much as you do. When we go inside we're just a payroll number to them."

Another worker said, "I drive 12 to 14 disabled people per day. Most of our clients can't live the way they do without this service. We're paid differently from city drivers; we haven't had a raise since August 2014. We have been without a contract for nine months before the strike."

"The proposal they offered us would mean I only get a raise of \$1.65. I don't even make that \$15 an hour they keep talking about. Eighteen dollars an hour is what it takes to afford a two-bedroom apartment in San Diego. I'd have to work until 2019 to afford that. I live with my parents."

One worker said, "I make under \$26,000 a year and I have a family of four. All they're doing with the wage increases is just keeping up with minimum wage. We're making just as much money as the guy flipping burgers but we're dealing with the frailest of the frail. I make \$11.50 an hour."

Regarding their bosses, he said, “We’re tools to them. I live in Mission Hills. Two hours to get there, two hours to get back. I love this job but I can’t keep doing it with a family to support.”

He warned, “Look at Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette; it can’t keep going on like this, and there’s more of us than there are of them.”



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