Chicago transit workers protest concession demands

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Last Wednesday, Amalgamated Transit Workers Union Locals 241 and 308 organized a “day of action” in protest against a proposed contract that includes no raises, an 18 percent increase in health insurance premiums, unlimited subcontracting of transit work, and the cutting of two holidays. Nearly 10,000 workers, employed by the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), have been working without a contract for a year.

Working conditions are a major point of contention. Both rail operators and bus drivers can face long shifts and work weeks well over 40 hours, with little time off between shifts. A culture of heavy-handed discipline exists, where a mistake no longer results in retraining, but instead, dismissal. This has led to short staffing, work overload, and low morale.

The action, union officials stated, was taken on workers’ own time and intended not to disrupt any transit service ahead of the Christmas holiday. At one of the three protests on December 21, ATU business manager and president Kenneth Franklin declared, “Let’s put the pressure on our coworkers to get them involved. We’ve got to get out of that lazy, stagnant mood we’ve been sitting in for years.”

In so far as there is a lack of enthusiasm from rank-and-file workers it is entirely due to the decades of collusion by the ATU in the erosion of transit workers’ living standards and work conditions.

Having long ago taken the measure of the ATU and the other municipal unions, Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the CTA officials are pressing ahead for deeper concessions even as they shower tax cuts and other subsidies on big business.

According to CTA officials, the transit agency is offering a 2 percent raise, which means a de facto pay cut for workers in one of the most expensive cities in America. CTA also calls the current policy of paid time off for birthdays and work anniversary hiring days as a “practice held over from a bygone era.”

Exhibiting more contempt, CTA President Dorval R. Carter stated that “The operators here at CTA are the second highest paid in the country,” while the *Chicago Tribune* wrote recently that “Labor is the agency’s biggest cost at 69 percent of the 2017 budget.” This suggests that CTA will demand further cutbacks in pay and benefits.

CTA has stated its negotiators have met with ATU more than 20 times since January 2016, and that negotiations have been “productive.” Yet the previous contract expired on December 31, 2015. Since then, workers have continued to labor under the terms of the old contract.

Throughout the country, transit workers, including more than 30,000 in New York City, are facing major contract struggles. Bus drivers in Dayton, Ohio, members of ATU Local 1385, have voted to strike in the first half of January over wages and cuts to health care. However, the ATU and the Transport Workers Union (TWU) are allied with the Democratic Party and have worked to block any resistance by workers to the austerity measures being demanded by big city Democrats and the Obama administration.

Earlier in December, ATU local 589 in Boston offered to negotiate concessions on pay within its contract, before it even expired. In 2015, ATU Local 26 in Detroit agreed to a new contract that continued poverty wages for Detroit bus drivers, with starting pay of only $12 an hour. In November, the TWU shut down a strike by 5,000 Philadelphia transit workers to prevent any disruption of the get-out-the-vote campaign for Hillary Clinton, and then imposed a sellout agreement that slashed pensions. This only points to what the ATU is preparing in Chicago.

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Chicago Transit Authority employs more than 9,800 workers. Local 241 covers bus drivers across the city, while local 308 covers rail operators, ticket agents, maintenance personnel, cleaners, and additional trades.

Bus drivers report that under Forest Claypool, now head of Chicago Public Schools, a crackdown was carried out against employees that used “Requested Days Off,” pushing workers to instead use sick days and work more overtime. Staffing is said to be increasingly short, as turnover increases.

Transit agencies are not covered by federal labor laws regarding hours-of-service, and are free to set their own standards. As heavy discipline and poor working conditions lead to staff turnover, CTA’s response demands more overtime, which avoids the costs of benefits with new hires. Drivers and operators already working 50, 60, or even 70 hours each week will have shorter rest periods and potentially more disruptive schedules under the proposed contract.

In 2014, a wreck that occurred when a rail operator drifted to sleep operating a Blue Line train revealed some of the scheduling employees endure. The CTA enacted rule changes for rail operators afterwards, which included some of the first restraints on scheduling. There is now a maximum of 12 hours of train-operating duty, when before there was no limit. Just one day off a week is mandatory. Previously, nothing was guaranteed. The minimum hours between shifts increased from 8 to 10 hours, but if shifting work times are allowed, rest may still be hard to come by for operators.

As workers reach nearly a year without a contract, national freight railroad workers are also undergoing a drawn out contract negotiation, where similar demands for lower labor and benefit costs and increased “flexibility” are being demanded. Chicago is the most concentrated region of freight rail employees, with thousands of workers from nearly all of the national major railroads. The unions are opposed to any joint struggle against the common attacks facing transit and rail workers.

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