

Dayton, Ohio transit workers strike over wages, health care

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Transit workers in Dayton, Ohio struck Monday for the first time in nearly six decades, impacting some 30,000 daily riders. The walkout, called by Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1385, involves 463 drivers and mechanics who are opposed to management's insulting wage offer and higher out-of-pocket health care costs.

Talks between the Greater Dayton Region Transit Authority (RTA) and the ATU had dragged on for two years. The most recent RTA offer included two percent wage increases in each of the next three years and up to a 10.5 percent wage increase for Project Mobility Drivers who provide services for disabled people. Management also proposed an additional two percent cash incentive. The union called the pay increases inadequate, and said it would not cover the proposed increases in health care costs. The ATU has also called for back pay from 2015.

The RTA said it has drawn up plans to operate the system using strikebreakers should enough qualified drivers become available. At a minimum it has indicated it plans to use management personnel to run Project Mobility.

The RTA called the most recent proposal by the ATU a "non-starter" and said it would increase costs to the system of \$3 million. "We are truly disappointed by the union's decision to strike, which will leave thousands of our citizens unable to travel to work or access medical and social needs," RTA CEO Mark Donaghy said in a written statement to the media. No talks are currently scheduled.

RTA management and Local 1385 officials met Sunday morning at an undisclosed location for last minute talks. ATU officials said management rejected a union proposal for binding arbitration, which would put the fate of workers' jobs and benefits in the hands of an

appointed third party official.

Under the RTA's proposed health insurance changes workers on a family plan would pay \$4,472 in insurance premiums and a deductible of \$5,000 before the plan contributes.

A retired RTA driver with knowledge of the situation spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* Monday. Speaking of management's contract proposal he said, "It was nothing but concessions and the workers turned it down. The workers just got tired of it.

"They want to increase health care co-pays and impose high deductibles. The two percent pay increase in the first year is no increase at all with the higher deductibles."

He said the union was "in concession mode" and was doing nothing to mobilize support. "The union has not tried to spread the strike and the workers are pretty much being isolated."

He said that previous contracts had imposed multi-tier pay rates and increased the time it takes for workers to get to top scale. "Whatever union officials you talk to, you get a different story on when your seniority starts and how much you are supposed to be paid."

"There are all kinds of different designations: part time, full time, all with different levels of pay. Now you have a lot of young workers and a lot of part timers. They come in five days a week, but they don't get to choose a run. They'll get an assignment in the morning for 2-3 hours and then go out again in the afternoon for a school run, but they don't get paid for the period between shifts. They might work 12-14 hours a day and still be part time."

Dayton transit workers are angry over the use by RTA of private investigators to monitor workers suspected of "faking" illnesses. In a statement reported in the *Dayton Daily News*, Donaghy said, "Yes, we use

surveillance at times. We use every tool in the tool kit. If we think someone is feigning illness, we are very aggressive with that.”

After a Freedom of Information Act Request RTA provided the *Dayton Daily News* with three December invoices totaling \$1,150 from Columbus-based Infoquest LTD. The names of the three employees being targeted were blacked out.

The ATU acknowledged that RTA fired three transit workers in December. In one case investigators videotaped a worker who had called in sick who later went to the store, using that as the pretext for dismissal. While Local 1385 President Glenn Salyer claimed the surveillance has been newly instituted on the part of management, Donaghy said, “He knows we’ve been doing this a long time. The only thing new is in the last several months attendance has been low here.”

Local news reports have downplayed the demands by drivers, and instead presented the strike as at least partially the product of personal animosity between Donaghy and Local 1385 President Salyer. In a stunt, apparently aimed at diverting workers’ anger over the union’s inaction relating to the contract, Salyer was arrested in August 2016 while passing out union literature on what RTA alleges was its private property. Salyer filed an unfair labor practice complaint with the state employment relations board but it dismissed the matter.

The city of 142,000, located in southwestern Ohio, just north of Cincinnati, is a former parts manufacturing center for General Motors. GM abandoned the city, nicknamed “Little Detroit,” along with other major manufacturers during the deindustrialization of the 1980s and 1990s. Today the city’s largest employers are hospitals and higher education.

The walkout by Dayton transit workers follows a week-long strike by nearly 5,000 drivers and mechanics in Philadelphia in early November. The Transport Workers Union (TWU) shut down the powerful strike after seven days. The TWU sabotaged the strike in a failed effort to boost the vote for Hillary Clinton on election-day.

The union accepted a miserable 10.5 percent pay increase over five years, a raise that will not keep pace with inflation. In addition, the TWU agreed that workers will be saddled with higher health care costs amounting to between \$46 and \$115 per month. There

was also an increase in copays for doctor or hospital visits, as well as increased copays for prescription medications.

The TWU did not address workers’ demands for proper rest and recuperation time, including bathroom time.

Meanwhile, with a January 15 contract deadline for 34,000 New York City transit workers approaching, TWU officials are seeking to dampen the militancy of workers. The workers, who live in one of the most expensive cities in the world, are seeking a real wage increase after suffering through a decade of a virtual pay freeze.

At a mass meeting Saturday transit workers were given virtually no information about the progress of contract talks and no strike vote was taken. Union officials did not allow rank-and-file workers to speak from the floor. The meeting was given over to promoting illusions in the Democratic Party. For his part New York City’s Democratic mayor, Bill de Blasio, has made it clear he opposes attempts by transit workers to recoup cuts the TWU accepted in past concession contracts.



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