

Chicago Transit Authority train operators vote to strike

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On Monday, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 308, the union covering 3,600 train operators and dozens of associated rail workers, announced that the local union membership had voted by a margin of 98 percent in favor of a strike against the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA).

Nearly 10,000 CTA workers, including 6,000 bus drivers, mechanics and other bus workers, have been working without a new labor agreement for 18 months. Bus workers, members of ATU Local 241, may be polled later this week on possible strike action.

The CTA has been pushing for a contract with below inflation-rate wage increases, higher health care costs, a reduction in vacation days, and expanded use of part-time work. Train and bus workers are determined to recoup lost wages and other concessions that the ATU has granted the transit authority over many years.

The ATU is so discredited that only a third of the membership participated in the strike vote. Immediately after the poll, the ATU made it clear it had no plans to call a strike. The CTA has declared that workers are barred from striking, referencing the no-strike clause in the long-expired contract.

The CTA is seeking a wide range of concessions, including meager 1%-1.5% raises that are more than offset by increased out-of-pocket health care contributions and other givebacks. Increased employee deductibles and other costs would mirror what a low-tier “Bronze” plan offers on the Obamacare Marketplace. Deductibles would rise from 10 to 20 percent, premiums would rise as coverage falls, and part-time employees would have to pay the same monthly premium as full-time employees, on vastly lower wages and hours.

Employees would also lose their birthday and anniversary as a paid holiday, and lose overtime pay on

holidays if it falls within an employee’s regular schedule of workdays. Many additional hours and overtime benefits are eliminated, including shift premiums, leading to a situation where CTA would be able to schedule workers at whatever odd hour, shift, or holiday, and only pay a regular rate. Layoff protections would also be eliminated, and unlimited use of part-time employees would be allowed in any job classification, allowing a reduction in full-time work.

Already, a vast amount of low-paid part-time work has been implemented at CTA, effectively creating a two-tier system. Customer Service Representatives, who staff hundreds of CTA stations and other jobs, were previously full-time positions paying standard wages. For years CTA has instead hired part-time workers who start at \$12.40 an hour, and who pay the same costs out of their paychecks as full-time employees.

In some cases, the CTA hires ex-offenders whom they will victimize for the slightest infraction. If the workers arrive one minute late, it is a “misstep,” and two missteps results in a suspension. These disciplinary measures are then used as a major barrier to getting full-time work; for those who can last, it often takes 3-5 years to become full time.

The overall disciplinary climate and working conditions have led to low morale. For train operators, two cameras watch their every move in the operator’s booth, while they are under tight pressure to stay on time and avoid discipline over petty rules. Management is often hired off the street with no transit experience, of little help during difficult situations, but adept at looking for mistakes to enforce discipline.

Gordon, a rail operator, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The job isn’t just taking the train from one point to the other. It became a one-man operation

[previously, doors were operated by a conductor, and the train by a motorman] in 1995 when CTA consolidated that work into the Operator position. Let's say something happens on the train. I have to physically get off, go to track level, find the problem, and they are timing you! You have a train full of people, and all they are concerned about is getting the train moving. They aren't concerned about somebody fighting, somebody having a medical emergency, or if somebody is back there with a gun. And they tell us to physically go back there and see if there is a gun!

"We don't get sick days. We get penalized for being sick. What we have is a 'sick book.' You can go in one time, the second time, you get a one day suspension. We're out in the elements everyday with these possibly dirty trains, and hundreds of people coming through. If you get sick more than one time, you get suspended for a day. And then the third time, you get suspended for 3 days. That is why there is a lot of FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act] usage."

The social crisis in Chicago has fallen heavily on CTA bus drivers and operators, who have to deal with its tragedies on top of their regular job duties. After the closure of mental health facilities by the Democratic administration of Mayor Rahm Emanuel, and with a lack of affordable housing, nearly every train has a homeless individual seeking shelter, a person panhandling, or someone in need of mental health care. During the harsh winter, the 24-hour Red and Blue train lines become a primary place of shelter for hundreds of homeless individuals. Violence, too, can spill into the buses and train cars, with workers facing threats and stressful scenarios.

Additionally, rail operators can face strenuous hours. Some work inconsistent shifts that vary between day and night, or lots of overtime. Others work "swing shifts," where they operate morning and evening with an unpaid break in the middle. This might be 7am-10am, 10am-2pm unpaid, then 2pm-7pm. Away from home, the unpaid time is nearly unusable, so a break room at a terminal will have a dozen operators waiting it out without pay, away from home for 14 hours.

These current conditions for CTA workers come from years of cuts pushed by the Democratic Party in Chicago, which has held control of city government, and by the ATU itself, which has allowed the

expansion of part-time work and heavy discipline. In transit contracts nationwide, the ATU has agreed to two-tier wages for drivers and operators.

In a *New York Times* op-ed piece last week, Mayor Emanuel boasted about the supposed efficiency of Chicago's transit system, saying nothing of the brutal speed up, invasive monitoring and other abuses his administration heaps on CTA workers. The ATU, along with the Chicago Teachers Union and other city unions, are politically allied with the Democratic Party, which like the Republicans, has slashed public services and attacked the jobs and health and pension benefits of public sector workers, while funneling billions to financiers who control the municipal bond market.

If transit workers are to fight, they must take the conduct of this struggle out of the hands of the ATU by electing rank-and-file committees to mobilize the broadest support in the working class for an industrial and political battle against Emanuel and the Wall Street banks that stand behind him.



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