

Washington, D.C., metro workers vote overwhelmingly to authorize strike action

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On Sunday, workers employed by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) voted 94 percent in favor of strike action. A strike by the 8,000 transit workers would be the first by Washington, D.C., Metro workers in 40 years.

The overwhelming support for strike action by D.C. Metro workers takes place as mass opposition has erupted among United Parcel Service workers over terms of a sellout deal accepted by the Teamsters that would that would replace regular drivers with lower-paid “hybrid” drivers. It occurs amid a deepening wave of working class opposition internationally to budget cuts and social austerity.

The strike vote sets the stage for a confrontation, not just with the WMATA board but with the administration of D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser, who has threatened transit workers with the prospect of jail time if they walk out in defiance of the law.

D.C. Metro workers, members of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) local 689, have been without a contract since July 2016, when negotiations broke down over pay, job cuts and privatization of services. Metro has been plagued by funding shortfalls and unsafe rail conditions, leading to a number of derailments and incidents, including a 2015 electrical fire that resulted in the asphyxiation death of a commuter. The dangerous and unreliable rail and bus conditions have resulted in a collapse of commuter traffic, with quarterly Metrobus ridership down 12 percent from a year ago.

On Tuesday, union executives met with representatives of WMATA General Manager Paul Wiedefeld. However, the union reported “no change” in either the union or management’s positions.

Earlier in 2018, Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia reached an agreement providing dedicated

sources of funding to Metro, an outstanding issue for the three competing jurisdictions. One of the conditions for Virginia’s agreement to the annual infusion of \$500 million was a 3 percent cap on the transit system’s operation costs, requiring Metro to consistently cut pay and benefits to its workforce. As Jack Evans, the Democratic chair of the Metro Board declared, WMATA “has to cut expenses and 80 percent of our expenses are in labor.”

Contradicting General Manager Wiedefeld’s mantra of instituting a “culture of safety” within the nation’s second largest public transit system, the private outsourcing of specific jobs has led to an overall degradation of Metro services. In addition, rules have been put in place requiring workers to notify management three days in advance in order to take sick leave. In response, a number of Metro locations have seen “late outs,” with workers showing up late for shifts to protest the increasingly difficult work conditions.

WMATA officials have issued warnings to the ATU demanding it “cease and desist from any further illegal action and that you immediately instruct your members to arrive on time for work and to comply with all standard operating procedures.”

In an indication of the immense anger and opposition building within the workforce, spokespeople for the ATU issued a press statement Sunday announcing an “overwhelming landslide” of support for a strike, with “thousands” voting for strike action. At the same time, the union has not set a strike deadline, with workers required to continue reporting to their shifts as usual.

Prior to the meeting with management officials, the union sought to assuage fears that any work stoppage would occur prior to Tuesday’s Major League Baseball All-Stars game hosted at Washington’s Nationals

Stadium.

While ATU leaders have engaged in demagogic statements and various public stunts appealing to local officials to intervene on workers' behalf, they are absolutely opposed to the working class asserting itself as a social force. "In my opinion, I don't think they will go on strike. I don't think it will happen. I think, at most, you will see a slow down," stated union local president Jackie Jeter to a local NBC affiliate. Elsewhere, Jeter has declared that "we're all on the same side and I wish the public would come out and tell management to treat workers right."

In 1978, thousands of WMATA workers engaged in a wildcat strike after management and arbitration failed to award a cost-of-living increase due to the transit employees. That strike, which lasted nearly a week, occurred against the opposition of the ATU leadership. Finally, with a combination of legal repression and outright deception, the WMATA and the ATU were able to bring the strike to an end. It was followed by a wave of retaliation against the leaders of the wildcat. As one striking worker told the *Washington Post* at the time, "[The] union is supposed to be the buffer between us and the company. Well, the buffer broke down. It's useless. So we're all alone in the middle."

Transit workers must take the necessary lessons from previous struggles as well as the recent experiences of public school teachers throughout the United States, whose statewide strikes developed in opposition to the unions. To be successful, the conduct of the struggle by D.C. Metro workers must be taken out of the hands of the ATU. Rank-and-file workplace committees must be set up independent of the unions as well as management and the representatives of the Democratic Party.

Workers must insist that all contract negotiations be carried out in the open and overseen by the rank-and-file, advancing demands to meet pressing needs including a 30 percent wage increase to make up for years of erosion in living standards, full funding of health care, no contracting out of jobs and workers' control over safety.

Metro workers must answer the threats by the mayor and transit officials by linking their struggle with workers throughout the region, including UPS workers as well as postal workers facing the threat of privatization and other government workers.

As the statements of Mayor Bowser make clear, the fight of Metro workers is a political struggle against the whole Democratic Party establishment in D.C., which has for decades overseen attacks on public services, jobs and workers' living standards in the service of wealthy bondholders. The success of any struggle by D.C. workers requires the development of a political movement of the working class against the corporate controlled two-party system.



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