

Washington D.C. transit union calls for “cooling off period” after Metro workers overwhelmingly vote to strike

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On Wednesday, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) officials representing nearly 9,000 Metro workers from Local 689 in the Washington, D.C. area met with representatives of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) to discuss ways to contain the growing demand of transit workers for strike action.

Metro employees have been working without a contract since summer 2016, when their federally-mandated agreement with WMATA expired amid negotiations over job cuts and pay.

Following a series of closed-door meetings with metro officials in which “good progress” was made but “no formal agreements” were reached, the union announced on social media that “parties will enter into a cooling off period for a few days and plan to meet again on Monday.”

The announcement came just days after workers delivered an overwhelming 94 percent “Yes” vote for strike action to combat years of degrading and dangerous working conditions, including the privatization of services and the termination and punishment of workers despite existing contractual protections.

Clearly troubled by the strike vote of thousands of metro employees in the second largest transit system in the United States, the *Washington Post* editorial board, the mouthpiece of the Washington political establishment, weighed in on the dispute Wednesday, warning the ATU: “The union... is playing with fire... Collective bargaining and arbitration are meant to buy labor peace; the trade-off is that strikes are illegal under Metro’s founding charter.”

Despite the contract’s expiration and WMATA’s

clear disregard for the workers’ contractual rights, employees have been told by Metro and local Democratic Party officials that a strike would be declared illegal, placing workers in jeopardy of job loss and even jail time.

Rather than go ahead with a work stoppage which could threaten its institutional and financial status, the ATU has sought to channel the anger of its members behind impotent appeals to the Democratic Party. The transit union followed its call for a “cooling down period” with letters to elected officials in the District, Maryland and Virginia to “get [WMATA General Manager Paul] Wiedefeld to follow the law, abide by the collective bargaining agreement, and bargain in good faith on all matters under his obligation.”

WMATA has been plagued by longstanding budget and infrastructural crises. As a part of a regional compact signed this year among the different jurisdictions that it serves, Metro is required to keep the growth of its operational costs below three percent, placing the transit system’s 12,000 workers in constant threat of pay cuts. The bankruptcy of the union’s plea to local officials is demonstrated by the fact that all jurisdictions previously agreed to the restrictions on workers’ pay, which were a prerequisite to obtaining a dedicated source of funding.

Contrary to the feeble backpedaling of the transit union, Metro workers have embraced the call to strike while heavily criticizing the union’s attempts to avoid it.

“Stand strong against those that would call for us to have no rights, to be hanged because we dare to stand up for all. Workers rights, due process, fair pay, and health care are not outrageous demands,” said one

worker on social media. “[They’re] stringing us along,” declared another, referring to the union’s decision to wait a week without taking action. “[WMATA is] buying time till they figure out their next checker move... See what they can contract out, how much can be contracted out. What company has the man power. How much can be pushed in court.”

Disproving the claims of WMATA and political officials that supposedly exorbitant pay for workers is causing a funding crisis at Metro, a 2017 study by the private consulting firm WSP USA, reported by the *Post*, found that pay and benefits were “in line with those of other major transit systems.” The study found hourly worker pay at WMATA to be \$2 less than several transit systems which also outlaw work stoppages, and over \$5 less than four systems which do allow strikes.

The ATU is preparing to sell out the struggle of metro workers before it even begins. It is of utmost importance that the struggle for decent pay, job protections and high quality benefits be removed from the hands of the ATU bureaucrats immediately. The ATU officialdom is not opposed to attacks on its members, only so long as its representatives are accorded “a place at the negotiating table” as such decisions are made.

To take their struggle forward Metro workers must break from the straitjacket of the ATU by forming politically independent rank-and-file committees to transform their struggle into a region-wide movement of working people. Threats from management and politicians must be met by appeals to other government workers, including postal workers, as well as United Parcel Service workers, who are also undergoing a fight against a sellout deal accepted by the Teamsters union to impose lower pay and increased exploitation. Such committees must demand a significant wage hike to compensate for years of lost pay, full funding of healthcare and other benefits, and the democratic control of the rank-and-file over safety.

Rank-and-file committees must be independent of the trade unions and the Democrats and Republicans, both parties of big business. We urge metro and other transit workers to establish contact with the *World Socialist Web Site*, which will assist in the formation of such organizations in a fight against the entire capitalist social order.



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