

After overwhelming vote for strike action

Washington, D.C. transit union conspires with Metro officials while keeping members in the dark

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On Monday, officials from the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 689 met for the third time in a week with representatives from the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), the second largest public transit system in the United States, in an effort to block any initiative by Metro workers who voted last week overwhelmingly in favor of a strike.

After emerging from closed-door meetings, which the union called “productive,” it announced: “Due to a scheduling conflict on WMATA’s part, the next negotiation meeting will be Monday, July 30. [WMATA] and ATU Local 689 will continue to confer via email and teleconference throughout the week. The union looks forward to a formal agreement in the very near future.”

Last Wednesday, the ATU announced a “cooling off period,” promising Metro management there would be no decision to strike until their meeting Monday. At the same time, the union appealed to elected officials to force WMATA to “bargain in good faith.”

In a move reeking of both cowardice and duplicity, the transit union is ignoring the 94 percent vote in favor of a strike delivered by workers last week while it continues to conspire with Metro officials in ways to sell out the struggle of its nearly 9,000 members in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan region, instead channeling their class anger behind the Democratic Party.

Starved of public funds and forced to rely on joint subsidies from the various jurisdictions it serves in the Washington, D.C.-Maryland-Virginia area, Metro has

faced a financial crisis for decades, suffering from multiple breakdowns, derailments and infrastructural malfunctions which have caused the transit system to lose thousands of weekly riders in the recent period.

Rather than deliver funds to replenish the region’s public transit, the political representatives of big business have attacked the pay and benefits of workers, agreeing to a Metro employee pay cap in return for dedicated maintenance funding.

Metro workers have been without a contract since 2016, when negotiations broke down over questions of pay cuts, job security and privatization of services. In the intervening two years, WMATA has proceeded to eliminate workers and replace unionized positions with private contractors—in essence, enacting the wish-list it sought in 2016.

The ATU has publicly argued that WMATA’s flagrant violation of these and other contract stipulations means the union does not have to observe the contract’s “no strike” clause, posting on social media Monday: “[The] Compact does not prohibit strikes. It does require final and binding arbitration of ALL labor disputes to avoid strikes. WMATA is unwilling to bargain in good faith. We will strike only if WMATA continues to refuse to bargain and arbitrate, as required by law.”

For their parts, the WMATA and local Democratic officials have taken the full measure of their “opponents” in the ATU, threatening union members with consequences for an “illegal” work stoppage. In a sign of how unfazed Metro officials are by the ATU’s empty threats, the ATU announced Monday that

WMATA General Manager Paul Wiedefeld had refused to attend meetings with union representatives, instead sending lower level spokespeople to the closed-door discussions.

At the same time, spokespeople for the political establishment have issued sharp warnings to the ATU that there will be consequences for a strike. Sean Kennedy, a visiting fellow at the libertarian-leaning Maryland Public Policy Institute, wrote in the *Washington Post* Friday calling for federal legislation to “abolish metro’s unions.” A day earlier, an editorial in the *Post* warned the ATU that it was “playing with fire” for threatening to violate its expired contract.

Rather than seeking to lead a fight against declining working conditions and attacks on pay, the ATU is seeking to head off any struggle of the working class under conditions in which a work stoppage could trigger a strike wave of public and private workers in the region and around the country. At the same time as Metro workers seek strike action to defend their jobs and pay, United Parcel Service (UPS) workers are denouncing a sellout deal reached by the Teamsters union and the delivery company. In June, the union’s 250,000 members ratified a call to strike by 93 percent.

Metro workers have continued to denounce the ATU’s backpedaling. Numerous workers have taken to social media, warning that WMATA is “putting together a contingency plan in place ahead of a strike.” Demonstrating the frustration in the face of the union’s conscious efforts to string transit workers along, one respondent to the union’s announcement stated “The ATU is GUTLESS. You don’t have the Balls to Strike!”

It is imperative that Metro employees, if they are to avert an impending betrayal, form independent rank and file committees, consisting of transit workers and other related industries in the region, to take their struggle out of the hands of the ATU, which is seeking to demoralize workers in order to enforce management’s demands.

Such a struggle can only be fought by a turn to the working class in the region, including UPS and postal service employees, who are also facing attacks on their living standards. In doing so, workers must demand substantial pay increases, job protection and a halt to privatization of services. Such committees must be independent of the Democratic Party representatives of

big business who, like their Republican counterparts, are at the forefront of attacks on the working class.



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