

As transit union continues to ignore its members' overwhelming vote to strike

Washington, D.C. transit authority moves to privatize bus maintenance services

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In a brazen move, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) officials announced a plan Thursday to privatize maintenance services for its Metrobus line in northern Virginia. The deal, worth \$89 million, will give the private transport company TransDev control of WMATA's soon-to-open bus garage in Lorton, Virginia.

The deal comes amid a heated dispute regarding the privatization of public services between the transit authority and 8,000 Metro workers, represented by the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 689. Three weeks ago, transit workers delivered an overwhelming "Yes" vote to strike to their union leadership, voting 94 percent in favor of the action after WMATA began contracting private firms to perform services reserved for union members.

Rather than heeding its members' call for a strike, the ATU sought to back away from the mandate immediately, calling for a "cooling off period" and then entering into a series of closed-door meetings with transit officials. On Friday, the ATU demonstrated its contempt for its rank-and-file, not even bothering to issue an update to its members after the fifth such closed-door meeting concluded.

Last week, the union announced with great fanfare that the transit authority had agreed to walk back its policy of hiring non-union contractors for custodial positions. According to ATU spokesperson David Stephen, the solitary concession was a confirmation that Metro "has recognized its contractual violations." Stephen reiterated to the *Washington Post* that the "strike threat" is unchanged" until all further

outstanding issues were settled.

It took no less than 72 hours for WMATA to go back on its word, awarding TransDev a multi-million-dollar contract to further privatize services in the public transit system. According to Metro, the deal is "expected to control cost growth while delivering quality service and preserving current employees' jobs." The ATU asserts that the non-unionized operation will result in lost work for its members.

In response to questions from a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter asking if the ATU would finally act on its members' strike vote in the face of such provocations, a spokesman on social media for ATU Local 689 stated dismissively: "That is a decision the union's elected officers are empowered to make. Not bystanders."

In a hypocritical denunciation of the deal on the ATU's blog, the union asserted: "Metro is dealing with a historic number of challenges that require attention with fierce urgency, but privatizing the system ... makes the problems worse by transferring the responsibility for public safety to a private company whose bottom line is the profit [sic]."

Later in the statement, the ATU got to the real point, admitting that, in the face of the inevitable privatization, "Local 689 is ready to do as we have with MetroAccess and D.C. Streetcar and organize those [TransDev] workers into the union. The union also plans to continue to seek a legal remedy to this blatant attempt to attack the union members."

In other words, the union will continue to stifle its own members' strike vote, instead focusing its efforts on appeals to the courts. At the same time, it will look

to deepen its pool of financial resources by seeking more potential members to extract dues money from.

The feckless attitude of the ATU seemingly knows no boundaries. In what might amount to the ultimate slap in the face of Metro workers, local news reported on Friday that in the lead up to the August 12 “Unite the Right” neo-Nazi rally in Washington, DC, WMATA was considering contracting three private train cars with additional security detail to ferry march participants to and from the event. According to ABC News, ATU Local 689 has encouraged its members “to follow safety protocol in the presence of this hate group if the rumored special accommodations General Manager Paul Wiedefeld plans to give are true.”

As of Saturday, the private train plan was rejected, with WMATA and DC officials announcing other “potential solutions” for transporting the far-right protesters. According to the *Washington Post*, government officials may be considering the use of privately-contracted buses and the deployment of military protection.

It is clear that there is no provocation or affront too great which the ATU is unwilling to force the Metro rank-and-file to bear. In order for their demands to be addressed, Metro workers must form rank-and-file committees and seek to join their struggle with other sections of the working class, such as United Parcel Service (UPS) workers who are currently fighting against a sellout contract being pushed by the Teamsters union.

Such committees must fight for absolute organizational and political independence from the ATU and other official labor organizations, as well as from the Democratic and Republican big business parties. The demands for increased wages, an end to privatization of public services, and the rehiring of all workers summarily fired by the transit system in the recent past must be raised and preparations made for a regional strike movement if these calls are not answered.



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