

Bus drivers in Massachusetts strike over wages and healthcare

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Bus drivers working for Vineyard Transit Authority (VTA) on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, have been on strike as of Friday, June 26. The action was preceded by years of fruitless negotiations between the drivers and VTA's parent company Transit Connection, Inc. (TCI). Drivers are seeking wage increases consistent with the cost of living on the island as well as improvements in safety, disciplinary procedures, healthcare and other working conditions.

The bus drivers' wages start at \$17 per hour, topping out at \$23.50 per hour after 16 years of service, and TCI provides no health insurance for the drivers' dependents. TCI's proposed health coverage plan would cost \$2,000 per month, with drivers contributing \$750.

The VTA supplements its full-time workforce with part-time and seasonal drivers, most of whom have continued working through the strike.

Andre Bonnell has been a full-time driver for 19 years and has lived on the island since 1970. "I have not had a raise in five years, whereas the management, of course, gets cost-of-living [increases] and benefits every year." Andre describes the less-than-complete solidarity among VTA employees, with some full-time drivers crossing picket lines. In his view "they want to eat the cake, but they don't want to help bake it." He says they are "not striking due to financial [concerns], they claim they can't afford it. Nobody can afford it. But you can't afford not to do it."

With no contract, the drivers are presently employees-at-will. The Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) has stepped in at the drivers' request to represent them in the negotiations, with the ATU-led drivers and the VTA trading accusations of misinformation, intransigence and bad faith. A press release on the ATU website asserts that "if TCI accepts the union's offer to

enter into interest arbitration, the strike would end immediately, employees would return to work, and a third-party arbitrator would consider proposals from both parties before issuing a binding decision on a final contract." It is doubtful that any such resolution would be other than a typical union-sponsored sellout of workers' interests.

A bus boycott has been only marginally effective. Despite some volunteers offering rides in their cars at their own expense, alternative modes of transportation are generally cost-prohibitive for workers and some tourists who use the buses are indifferent.

The overall community, however, has been overwhelmingly supportive of the strike. Passing motorists often honk in solidarity with the picketing drivers. Local food pantries have offered their assistance to the drivers and their families, to supplement the nominal weekly stipend provided by the ATU. Reader comments on local news websites are sympathetic. One teenage seasonal worker whom we spoke to is using her bicycle rather than the bus to get to work, even though she had already bought an annual bus pass.

Martha's Vineyard, an island located south of Massachusetts' Cape Cod, is a popular summer resort destination among the affluent, including wealthy celebrities and Democratic politicians such as the Clintons and Obamas. The booming second-home market has driven up housing costs, while at the same time, according to census data, median wages on the island are below those of workers in the rest of Massachusetts. During the tourist season the island's population expands from approximately 17,000 to over 100,000, with thousands of seasonal workers arriving, many from overseas, to work multiple jobs despite onerous conditions. There are cases of workers unable

to afford rents who end up sleeping in cars.

Some landlords are unwilling to offer 12-month leases because weekly rentals command such high prices during the tourist season. Among permanent, year-round residents there are renters who can only afford monthly rentals during the off season, then have to move out and scramble to find alternative housing during the tourist season. This phenomenon, known as the “island shuffle,” is a problem that persists despite some efforts on the part of local authorities to alleviate it.

Jason has been a driver for the VTA for 11 years, and a resident of the island since 1984. He characterizes the housing market as “ridiculous.” Jason lives in what is known as an affordable housing complex, but at \$23 per hour he does not qualify for the “affordable” rate, and instead pays the “market” rate of over \$2,300 a month for his family’s three-bedroom unit, i.e., over 50 percent of his gross income.

Housing prices in the wealthiest parts of Martha’s Vineyard are stratospheric. In 2018, the median sale price of single-family homes in the communities of Aquinnah and Chilmark was in excess of \$1 million. These communities serve as playgrounds for the very rich. At the relative low end, in Oak Bluffs, the median price was \$635,000—still well beyond the means of a family making the median income.

The acute inequality and untenable conditions confronting the working class on Martha’s Vineyard are extreme, but by no means unique. Democratic politicians such senator and presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren have paid lip service to the bus drivers’ cause, but they cannot and will not offer a genuine solution because the fundamental problem is the capitalist profit system which they support.



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