

Washington DC: Private metro contract workers launch first transit strike in over 40 years

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On Thursday, bus drivers, mechanics and utility workers at the recently privatized Cinder Bed Road Metrobus facility in Northern Virginia launched a strike against the French transport firm Transdev after talks for a new contract stalled between the company and the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689, which represents over 13,000 workers throughout the Washington, D.C. region and over 8,000 Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) workers.

The strike is the first transit work stoppage effecting WMATA in over 40 years, since a weeklong wildcat strike in 1978 brought the entire system to a standstill. As with the growth of working-class struggles across the globe, the current strike represents a deepening radicalization of masses of workers across the planet, beginning last year with the struggles of school teachers and public workers and finding expression today in mass demonstrations and strikes shutting down entire cities, such as the massive 1.5 million workers demonstrating against social austerity in Chile this week.

The striking workers, who serve roughly 5 percent of total Metrobus users, have managed to snarl commutes for thousands in the heavily populated Northern Virginia suburbs, with many lines being forced to resort to skeleton-bone bus schedules in order to compensate.

Workers at the facility are striking because of Transdev's systematic exploitation and overwork of its employees. Despite driving the same routes and vehicles as WMATA employees, Transdev workers receive roughly half the take-home pay of their public transit peers, as well as paying thousands of dollars more in health insurance since the firm took over a portion of WMATA's services last year.

At a picket line outside the facility, which is located near Northern Virginia's busy Interstate 95 highway

corridor, workers spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about harrowing job conditions.

"We shouldn't be forced to work in extreme conditions," said Albert, a bus operator with over 18 years' experience. Another worker, who asked to remain anonymous, gave a clear picture of what these conditions were: "There are stains on the ground [from leaking chemicals] in areas we serve," the worker said. "Our rearview mirrors are held up with paper towels. When these things are brought up to management, they turn around and redeploy the bus somewhere else."

According to a report in *ARLnow.com*, a hazmat team was forced to respond to a chemical odor coming from a bus near the Pentagon last August. After being forced to exit the highway, the driver sought assistance before passing out due to the apparent gas leak.

According to the ATU, later that day the defective bus was placed back in service without any maintenance work being done, leading to further complaints from employees and passengers.

The lack of adequate safety is endemic within WMATA, where workers receive inadequate break and rest periods. A 2015 article in the *Washington Post* notes that many WMATA bus and train operators have been forced to resort to wearing adult diapers while at the job.

The dangerous use of damaged vehicles despite complaints and injuries exposes the claims made by WMATA management that the metro authority is supposedly preoccupied with a concern for safety and that previous lapses, including the death of a metro commuter in 2015, were the fault of the workers themselves.

Likewise, workers at the picket line denounced the profitable corporation, which bragged about its "strategic commercial wins" and "targeted acquisitions" around the world in its various annual earnings reports. "We have to

fight back,” stated Albert, responding to comments about the massive struggle launched by General Motors workers over the past month against the powerful transnational automaker. “It’s the only way we show these multibillion-dollar corporations that we mean business,” he said.

According to Transdev’s 2017 earnings report, the transit firm has investments throughout the world, including its home country of France, as well as a contract worth nearly €2 billion in the Netherlands, making the corporation the “de facto...largest electric bus operator in Europe.” In addition, it holds contracts in Auckland, New Zealand, a \$125 million agreement with the Hudson Link in upstate New York as well as a \$100 million contract with Phoenix, Arizona for operation of the Valley Metro system.

Workers on strike at the Cinder Bed facility must make an appeal to similarly exploited workers worldwide. Last month, New York City Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) workers were delivered a laundry list of demands by the company as their three-year contract expired. Negotiations between the MTA and the Transit Workers Union have stalled out over demands that workers double their current healthcare contributions and accept layoffs as well as the privatization of services.

Waging such a necessary struggle cannot be left in the hands of the ATU. Despite the courageous stand and legitimate demands of the Cinder Bed Road workers, ATU Local 689 is seeking to isolate the strike to a single facility, keeping the rest of its over 13,000 members on the job.

This strategy is all the more treacherous considering that last year WMATA’s unionized membership voted by 94 percent to go on strike after metro management violated its contract by outsourcing work to private contractors. At the time, the ATU responded by announcing a “cooling off period” and engaging in a series of secret closed-door meetings with metro officials. Less than 3 weeks after the near-unanimous vote to strike, WMATA announced its \$89 million deal with Transdev, a further violation of the contract.

The ATU cowered to this brazen slap in the face, continuing to refuse to mobilize its members and merely demanding that it be given rights to extract dues money from these highly exploited workers.

“It’s like we can’t trust anyone, the management, the union—they’re all corrupt,” said a WMATA transit worker to the WSWS about the ATU’s conduct. Noting the transit workers’ inherent social power, the worker said that a WMATA strike could “shut down the entire

East Coast, you’d feel the impact all the way up to New York.”

Predictably, so-called “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders tweeted Thursday: “With a strong union, workers get the basic protections they deserve. Unions like ATU are defending workers every day against the expansion of corporate greed within our transit systems. I support in its fight for justice [sic].”

Such advances, aimed at shoring up the trade union’s control over the strike, should be rejected. The Democratic Party-run local governments in Washington, D.C. and its surrounding municipalities, tasked with overseeing the maintenance and funding for metro, have consistently run roughshod over the well-being and rights of metro workers, creating the current crisis.

According to recent studies, social inequality in the District of Columbia and its outlying suburbs has found expression in the number of working people forced to rely upon lengthy and circuitous transit routes to their jobs. According to a report published last year by Apartmentlist.com titled the “Rise of Supercommuters,” or people required to commute each day for over 90 minutes to and from work, “In most US metros, low-income commuters are more reliant on public transportation than high-income commuters, creating a nexus between super-commuting and poverty.”

In order to address the social needs of the working class, including workers reliant on public transit, a fight must be waged by workers to break free from the pro-capitalist organizations calling themselves trade unions and seek to foster a new unity with fellow workers. This must take place through the creation of genuinely democratic independent neighborhood and workplace committees, seeking to unify workers across industries in order to fight for their social rights against the capitalist system as a whole.



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