

# Northern Virginia transit workers vote to strike as walkout by Metrobus contract workers enters third week

Nick Barrickman  
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On Saturday, over 600 drivers and other staff working for Virginia's largest transit service, the Fairfax Connector, voted to strike as early as Monday if the Amalgamated Transit Union local 1764 doesn't reach an agreement with the bus service's contractor, Transdev, which took over the bus line's operation last July.

Though the total percentage of strike ratification votes have not yet been reported, a statement by the local ATU declared, "A job action, including a strike, is likely next week if an agreement is not reached." The *Washington Post* reported that Connector workers "overwhelmingly voted Saturday to authorize a strike that they could call at any time."

The threatened job action occurs as over 130 bus drivers, mechanics and utility staff remain on strike after more than two weeks at the nearby Cinder Bed Road Metrobus facility in Northern Virginia. The facility was acquired from the Washington Metropolitan Area Metro Authority (WMATA) by the French conglomerate Transdev, which operates as a low-cost private contractor for WMATA.

The Amalgamated Transit Union local 689, which covers over 13,000 workers in the Washington D.C. metro area, have been holding discussions over a collective bargaining agreement with Transdev since February and called a strike late last month after talks broke down.

Workers at the Metrobus contractor want wage parity with their public sector counterparts who make nearly \$12 more although they drive the same vehicles. Transdev workers also oppose unsafe driving conditions, including the contractor's use of defective or damaged buses. In August, a driver and passengers

were sickened after a bus from the facility began emitting a chemical odor.

While the Metrobus-Transdev strike has affected roughly 8,500 commuters in Northern Virginia, a strike at the Connector would hit over 30,000, raising the specter of a regional halt in transit services in the US capital and one of the busiest transit centers in the country.

The struggle of transit workers occurs as Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) workers in New York City—the country's largest transit system—have been working without a contract for over five months. The Transport Workers Union is blocking any strike against the draconian demands of the MTA and Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, which want to outsource to private contractors, expand part-time temporary work and cut health care in order to funnel even more money to the wealthy bond holders who control the transit system's huge debt.

In India, over 48,000 transit workers at the Telengana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC) have defied a back-to-work order from the state government last week. More broadly the struggle by D.C. area transit workers occurs amid a resurgence of the class struggle internationally as workers and youth seek to fight back against austerity and attacks on living standards which have intensified since the 2008 global financial crash.

The ATU has worked to keep the struggling workers in the various sectors separate from one another. The strike of privatized Metrobus workers comes a little over a year after the ATU ignored a 94 percent strike vote by over 8,000 Metro workers, keeping them on the job while WMATA violated contractual obligations by

privatizing Metro services and carrying out the sale of the \$89 million Cinder Bed Road facility to Transdev.

Late last month, the ATU and Fairfax Connector were forced to back down from their effort to force Connector drivers to scab on lines previously served by striking Metrobus-Transdev operators after workers discovered the plan.

On October 30, the Fairfax County Department of Transportation announced “[t]he limited temporary rush-hour service on Fairfax Connector ... will no longer operate starting tomorrow, Thursday, Oct. 31, 2019,” before adding that three “supplemental” trips on the main southbound route would continue during rush hour.

Speaking at a rally last week, ATU Local 689 president Raymond Jackson, Jr. sought to beat back the determination of workers to fight, saying, “You can talk about striking all day but when it’s time for you to cross that line ... you literally just fired yourself.” If workers struck, he warned, “All income stops, and I know that some of these workers are head of family and [they’re] single parents.”

Transit workers must take their struggle out of the hands of the ATU by building independent rank-and-file strike committees to mobilize workers and young people throughout the Washington D.C. region, including the public metro workers at WMATA. Like the New York City transit workers and Chicago teachers, Metro D.C. transit workers are facing a direct struggle against the Democratic Party, which claims there is no money for public services while it hands over billions in tax cuts and debt payments to giant corporations and Wall Street investors.



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