

Washington, DC area transit workers call for expansion of fight as strike enters fourth week

Nick Barrickman
20 November 2019

Workers employed by a private contractor for Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) are increasingly eager to expand their fight against the attack on their living standards and the privatization of public services in the US capital.

Since October 24, 130 bus operators, mechanics and other service technicians at the recently-privatized Cinder Bed Road facility in Northern Virginia have been on strike against the French-owned conglomerate Transdev, which had revenues of \$7.3 billion in 2018. Last week bus drivers at Northern Virginia's Fairfax Connector, a local transit service also contracted to Transdev, voted to strike "if an agreement is not reached" by November 30, when the contract expires for over 600 drivers.

Workers demand better pay, healthcare, retirement benefits as well as safe work conditions. "We do the same job. Why should we make \$20 while others make \$30?" Nora, a striking bus operator at Transdev, told the WSWS, referring to the \$12 differential in pay between private bus drivers and WMATA employees.

Cinder Bed Road workers pay \$6,000 deductibles in health insurance for individuals and \$12,000 for families, far more than public sector drivers. Some do not even qualify for 401(k) pension plans. Workers who spoke to the WSWS also told horror stories of drivers being forced to work 10 hours straight without breaks as well as having buses break down and lose engine power while driving on the highway.

"I wake up at 3:00 a.m. and drive an hour just to get to work," said a worker on the picket line who was hired in just before the strike. "[Transdev] has me work a split shift, which means that they send me home for four or five hours in the middle of the day before I work again. I can't just drive an hour home and then come back, what time is there to do anything?"

"Transdev told me to go and work for Uber for a few hours if I need more money," another striker told the

WSWS. "At least 90 percent of all the shifts here are split," he said.

If Cinder Bed Road workers are joined by Fairfax Connector drivers, the resulting work stoppage could impact nearly 40,000 commuters and over 100 Northern Virginia bus routes in one of the busiest transit corridors in the nation.

Transit workers are fighting Transdev, a "public transport company" with investments in public transit services in 20 different countries, and WMATA. They are also fighting the local governments in Washington, DC, Maryland and Virginia, which are seeking to sell off public assets and force private sector workers to do the same jobs for less, creating pressure to cut pay for public transit workers.

In 2018, WMATA agreed to provide a dedicated funding source for the nation's second largest public transit system. As part of the three-jurisdiction deal, WMATA will be forced to keep yearly increases in operating expense below 3 percent. According to the *Washington Post*, "The transit authority awarded Transdev an \$89 million contract in 2018 to run the garage, saying at the time that privatization would save \$15 million over five years and prevent layoffs by avoiding paying garage workers' pension and retirement benefits."

In the current struggle, WMATA and its CEO Paul Wiedefeld (who received a \$37,000 raise last year, bringing his annual salary to \$435,000) have sought to posture as concerned bystanders without a say in a dispute between third parties. This is a farce. Metro officials are hoping Transdev will deliver a blow to striking workers and have continued to pay the private contractor even though Transdev has violated contractual obligations to maintain services. "Strikes, by their nature, are disruptive and it would be unrealistic to expect normal service levels with a strike in progress," said Metro spokesperson Ian

Jannetta to the *Post* last month.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to numerous striking workers at picket lines and other facilities in Northern Virginia and the sentiment for a united struggle against privatization and anti-worker attacks is widespread.

“Of course it would be more effective if there was a strike at Fairfax Connector. It would cause a big mess for transportation, [only] 5 percent of routes are affected now,” stated Ephram, a striking worker from the Cinder Bed Facility. “[WMATA] sets the bar for us. If it’s okay to privatize one contract, they will do it to another contract,” said Edwin, a driver at the Fairfax Connector.

However, the chief obstacle to the unification of transit workers is the Amalgamated Transit Union itself, which is running a strikebreaking operation ordering members of the same local to continue working while the embattled Transdev workers fight the giant conglomerate, WMATA and both big business parties.

The ATU has forced over 8,000 WMATA public transit workers to stay at work to keep Metro operations moving. This is despite a 2018 strike ratification vote of 94 percent by the local’s 8,000 workers after WMATA general manager Wiedefeld violated the contract by outsourcing their work.

No sooner had transit workers voted to strike against this illegal cost cutting move than the ATU, terrified of a movement of the working class in one of the US’s most socially unequal areas, called a “cooling off period” and retreated behind closed doors to figure out a way to bury the strike vote with WMATA officials. Less than three weeks later, WMATA announced plans to sell its newly built Cinder Bed Road garage to Transdev, a further violation of the contract.

The ATU accepted WMATA’s privatization scheme, instead publishing a statement demanding the right to “organize those [Transdev] workers into the union.” As far as the ATU is concerned it does not matter how little transit workers earn as long as they pay union dues to fund the bloated salaries of top officials like ATU President John Costa who is pocketing \$232,569 this year.

On Wednesday, the transit firm and the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689 will meet again after having broken off and restarted contract negotiations several times since February, when the ATU first gained collective bargaining status. “It’s about time Transdev, Now Bargain in Good Faith” read an official ATU local 689 statement.

The letter quotes Local 689 president Raymond

Jackson, Jr., who declares, “if Transdev walks away again we demand that the [WMATA] Board and [GM] Wiedefeld compel the company to stay at the table until we reach an agreement.” If “Transdev abandons negotiations again,” Jackson thunders, “ATU Local 689 will be prepared to hold WMATA, the Board and Wiedefeld accountable.”

Given the ATU’s track record, there is no doubt that Wiedefeld and WMATA are resting easy in the face of this toothless threat.

Workers must reject the conspiracy between the ATU and the Democratic and Republican parties, which are all seeking to starve public infrastructure and impoverish workers in order to fund vast resources to the wealthy municipal bond holders. Transit workers must form rank-and-file workplace committees, independent from and in opposition to the ATU and all other enforcers of capitalist austerity.

Such committees will fight to unite with public metro employees, visiting WMATA garages and appealing to spread the strike. They must appeal to workers, including 40,000 New York City public transit workers at the Metropolitan Transit Authority, who are fighting the expansion of part-time and temporary labor and other draconian demands, even as the Transport Workers Union has kept them on the job more than five months after the expiration of their contract.

In addition to fighting for wage and benefit parity, workers must put a stop to the privatization of the Metro system and split shifts, which place employees at the beck and call of their employers and expose them to numerous dangers. Instead, trillions of dollars must be poured into the public transit system in order to provide low-cost and dependable transportation to everyone. To fund this, workers must launch a political counteroffensive to radically redistribute society’s wealth so that the needs of the vast majority take precedence over the private accumulation of vast fortunes by the corporate and financial elite.



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