Democratic Party calls on Washington Metro Transit Authority to intervene against striking transit workers

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As the strike of more than 130 Washington metro area bus drivers and mechanics at the multinational conglomerate Transdev reaches its second month, Democratic Party politicians in Virginia are demanding that the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) step up efforts to break the strike.

In a letter to Metro general manager Paul J. Wiedefeld and Chairman Paul Smedburg, Congressional Democrats Gerald E. Connolly, Donald Beyer, Jr. and Jennifer Wexton, each representing districts served by Metro, called on the transit authority to "create transportation alternatives for riders"—in plain language, reopen the closed routes with scab labor—and to "take a more proactive role" in the dispute between Transdev and the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689.

The company recently bought the rights from WMATA to serve 18 different bus routes in the Northern Virginia suburbs, serving over 8,500 riders. Workers have been on strike since October, fighting to achieve wage parity with their public sector counterparts, who often make $12 more doing the same work.

In addition, Transdev workers are forced to pay excessively high healthcare deductibles of $6,000 for individuals and $12,000 for families, have no retirement benefits and are forced to work grueling shifts, often without breaks. A number of workers have told the *World Socialist Web Site* that drivers are asked to work split shifts, forcing them to work early mornings and then evening rush hour, creating havoc in their personal lives.

The wording of the representatives' letter is deliberately equivocal, in order to provide cover for their demand that WMATA shut down the strike. For example, immediately after demanding that the transit authority "create transportation alternatives" to closed routes, they hypocritically bemoan the low wages of the striking bus drivers and call on the Metro to "choose contractors wisely to ensure fair compensation of the entire … workforce and ongoing safety and reliability for riders."

ATU Local 689 promoted this charade, posting a link to the letter on their social media accounts with the exclamation: "Thank you Congressman Don Beyer, Congresswoman Jennifer Wexton, and Congressman Gerry Connolly for your support! We need a 21st century transportation system and the month long Cinder Bed Bus Garage strike proves that privatization is not the answer."

In fact, the letter says nothing about opposing privatization. Congresspersons Beyer, Connolly and Wexton make clear that "regardless" of whether Metro ultimately keeps the bus garage private or not, "increased reliance on outside contractors places an increased burden on WMATA to choose its contractors wisely to ensure fair compensation of the entire … workforce and ongoing safety and reliability for riders."

Elsewhere, the congressional Democrats acknowledge "that the decisions to privatize pieces of WMATA have been made with an eye toward financial stability," accepting the overarching framework which is being used to cut social services and privatize the system.

According to the "metro compact" agreed to by the governments of Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia—controlled by the Democratic Party in all

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three jurisdictions—a dedicated funding source from the three localities served by Metro would be contingent on keeping costs low.

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."

The ATU is complicit in the drive to privatize metro services and lower the living standards of the workforce. The ATU Local 689, which represents over 13,000 workers and retirees in the D.C. area, has run a scabbing operation on its 130 Cinder Bed Road members, forcing workers in the broader Metro system to remain at work, which has minimized the impact of the strike at Transdev.

This is in line with the ATU's complicity in WMATA's selling of the $89 million Cinder Bed Road complex in August 2018. At the time of the privatization, Metro workers had voted less than three weeks earlier to strike against WMATA and general manager Wiedefeld's outsourcing of work to private contractors, which violated their contract. Instead of mobilizing its members against a clear effort to destroy public transit and undermine the well-being of public workers, the ATU called a "cooling off period," burying the strike vote behind hot air and back door negotiations with WMATA.

In addition, as has occurred in other recent workers' struggles which have been organized by the trade unions, Transdev employees have been starved of pay while on strike. The *Washington Post* quoted striking Cinder Bed Road bus operator Sherita Autrey, who stated, "I'm late on everything. Car insurance, paying little by little on rent. New baby needs Pampers, wipes." Other workers stated that they had turned to taking on credit card debt in order to make ends meet.

Meanwhile, a little more than two weeks ago, over 600 Fairfax Connector bus drivers in Northern Virginia also employed by Transdev voted to authorize strike action once their contract expires at the end of the month. According to Connector drivers who spoke to the WSWS, their ATU local has told them that Transdev was "asking for more time," meaning that it is likely the ATU will force them to remain on the job for the foreseeable future.

While the ATU has sought to appeal to the Democratic Party to help it end the struggle, it has kept its own membership in the dark about the current contract negotiations. While the ATU bargains at the Fairfax Connector, last week the union entered into federal mediation with government-appointed officials over the ongoing negotiations between the Cinder Bed Road garage.

The strike is at a critical point. There is an urgent need to take the strike's conduct out of the hands of the ATU's scabbing agents through the formation of rank-and-file workers' committees, independent of the ATU and the trade union bureaucracy, as well as the Democratic and Republican parties.

The Democratic Party, which has focused its opposition to the right-wing Trump administration around issues of foreign policy, fears a movement of the working class in the nation's capital most of all. Such a struggle would reveal the Democratic Party for what it is—the bitterest enemy of the working class, no less so than the Trump administration.

These committees would be free to meet the government's privatization drive with a fight to expand the strike to the rest of their counterparts throughout the D.C. metro system, utilizing the social leverage of the working class. This will require appealing to drivers and train operators within the metro system to join the strike and shut down the system.

The fight against privatization and poor and inadequate pay requires a movement of the working class internationally, directed at the source of the drive to cut costs, the capitalist system.

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