

Union moves to end Washington DC-area transit strike, agrees to cost-cutting deal

Nick Barrickman
11 December 2019

On Tuesday night, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 689 and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA or Metro) released a joint public statement announcing that a deal had been struck between the transit union and the US capital's transit system. The deal, both parties have claimed, would reverse Metro's privatizing of various functions of the system.

The announcement follows Sunday's decision by ATU Local 1764 to call off the strike of nearly 600 Fairfax Connector transit bus operators in Northern Virginia against the transit firm Transdev, which privately operates the bus system in the DC suburbs. The ATU acknowledged that the settlement failed to resolve workers concerns over "wages, vacation, sick [leave], [or] retirement," i.e., all the most basic issues.

According to the *Washington Post*, the handshake agreement between the union and Metro allows "the transit agency to give up its strategy of privatizing some operations to save money." The joint statement of Metro and the ATU declared that a "major development" had been made between the two parties that would create "incentives for better customer service, enable Metro to live within its legally-required 3 percent subsidy growth cap, and create a path to bring in-house work performed at Cinder Bed Road bus garage and on the Silver Line."

The deal means the ATU will also move quickly to shut down the six-week strike by 130 bus drivers, mechanics and other workers at the WMATA bus garage on Cinder Bed Road in Northern Virginia, which is also privately operated by the French-based conglomerate Transdev. The striking workers make \$12 less than those in the public sector, pay higher health care deductibles and have worse working conditions.

According to the *Post*, "the transit authority viewed

contracting out operations as a way to save \$15 million over five years by not paying the new garage employees Metro pensions and retirement benefits." ATU officials who spoke to the *Post* refused to reveal wage and benefit details, merely stating "the plan will be voted on by union members in coming days."

What the ATU is hiding is that by striking this bargain, the union has agreed to cut wages, pensions and health care benefits within the public Metro system, supposedly under the guise of "defeating privatization." In this way, the ATU will continue to collect dues to finance the bloated salaries of its top officials while systematically imposing "privatized" conditions on public transit workers. Workers being given this false bill of goods to vote on should reject what is handed to them with the contempt that it deserves.

Metro officials, with the collusion of the ATU, will seek endlessly to drive out older, higher-paid workers and replace them with a new generation of low-paid and increasingly part-time and temporary workers. At the same time older workers will face an attack on their pension and retiree health benefits.

According to a June credit opinion authored by Moody's investor service, key threats to Metro's current credit rating include "elevated capital needs," such as the maintenance of public facilities, and a "high unfunded pension and OPEB [other post-employment benefits] burden" for workers.

These provisions will now be swept under the rug as the ATU celebrates its supposed "victory" over the private sector contractor, Transdev.

By dutifully calling off the strike at the Connector on Sunday, the ATU provided a service to the corporate giant, which was under mounting pressure for its failure to resolve the work stoppages in Northern Virginia.

The decision to call off the strike and enforce private-sector style provisions within the public system occurred days after the Transport Workers Union in New York City agreed to a sellout deal for nearly 40,000 Metropolitan Transit Authority workers who had been forced to work for six months without a contract. Two months ago, the MTA revealed a concessions-laden proposal codifying the privatization of a number of MTA functions. Last week, the TWU accepted the state's offer, releasing only a fraudulent "highlights" list, forcing members to vote on a contract they haven't even been allowed to see.

Prior to the Fairfax Connector strike, increasing calls were mounting from local political officials for WMATA to step in and mediate the conflict and "provide alternatives" for commuters affected by the work stoppage at Cinder Bed Road, which has stranded nearly 8,500 riders in Northern Virginia. Others had voiced concerns that WMATA's efforts to privatize were too potentially destabilizing, and had encouraged it to backtrack on its wholesale selling of Metro work to the private sector.

As the deal between the ATU and Metro underscores, the Democratic Party believes that such low paid conditions are achievable without an open break with the public sector unions.

The treachery of the transit unions underscores the necessity for workers to take the conduct of this struggle out of the hands of the ATU and to build rank-and-file committees independent of the union and operatives of the Democratic and Republican parties of big business.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact