

Amalgamated Transit Union forces 130 striking Northern Virginia Transit Workers back to work without an agreement

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In a complete sellout of an almost two-month-old strike, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) has agreed to send 130 striking bus employees of multinational transportation company Transdev back to work without an agreement. The striking workers operate bus lines of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) in Northern Virginia out of the Cinder Bed Road garage. Cinder Bed Road represents the only segment of the WMATA's rail and bus system that is privatized.

The ATU's sellout comes directly on the heels of the union forcing another 600 transit workers back to work on December 8, also without an agreement, after a four-day strike. This second strike involved employees who operate and maintain buses for the Fairfax Connector system, and who are also employed by Transdev. Fairfax Connector and WMATA are interconnected transit systems, as many Connector buses feed into WMATA lines.

In a December 8 Facebook "bargaining update" video announcing the end of the Fairfax Connector strike, the ATU acknowledged that it was ordering its members back to work despite no agreement on the most basic issues, including "wages, vacation, sick [leave], [or] retirement ... all the things that cost money ... the key things in the contract that a lot of people care about."

The ATU video further reveals the complete subordination of the unions to the Democratic Party. The ATU hailed as a "big development" and one of the primary reasons for calling off the strike the fact that the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors Chair, Democrat Jeff McKay, had called on the union and the company "to call off the strike and meet with him" the next day.

Throughout the two strikes, the ATU refused to call out its 7,500 members who work directly for WMATA, leaving the vast majority of the Washington-area public transit system fully operational, and leaving the striking Cinder Bed Road workers completely isolated. The results of this isolation are now clear. The ATU dragged out the Cinder Bed Road strike not to win a decent contract for the transport workers, but to wear workers down.

The WMATA/Transdev employees are paid on average \$12 an hour less than drivers employed directly by WMATA (also known as Metro). The Transdev employees also face \$6,000 healthcare deductibles for individuals and \$12,000 for families, while Metrobus workers have none. The Transdev employees also have no defined benefit pension, in contrast with Metrobus workers. Further, the Transdev employees have not had a raise since the Cinder Bed garage opened about two years ago. Among other demands, the Transdev employees were seeking wage and benefit parity with Metrobus workers.

The sell-out of the Cinder Bed Road strike comes as the ATU reached agreement on a new four-year contract for its WMATA members. As part of that agreement, to take effect July 1, 2020, WMATA agreed to not further privatize bus or rail lines. WMATA also agreed that it would return the work currently contracted to Transdev at Cinder Bed Road back into its direct control after the termination of the WMATA-Transdev contract "but no later than January 1, 2022."

In a separate "Cinder Bed Road Transition Agreement" between the ATU and WMATA, which will not become effective until the termination of the WMATA-Transdev agreement, current Transdev

employees working at Cinder Bed Road must apply for employment with WMATA in order to continue working the same exact job. Furthermore, in order to “catch up” on lost pension benefits while employed by Transdev, the employees will have the option to “buy back” prior years of service by increasing required employee contributions to the pension plan by an additional 3 percent of pay “until such time as the cost is met.”

In the meantime, for the next two years, the Cinder Bed Road employees will continue to operate at the mercy of Transdev. In another Facebook post, the ATU said that it agreed to return the strikers to work “only ... if and when Transdev provides assurances that no workers will be harassed or retaliated against for exercising their right to strike. We also want assurances that Transdev will actually bargain in good faith.” In an empty threat, the statement added that “We are also fully willing to walk back out if Transdev continues to waste time, stall, and delay at the bargaining table with insulting offers.”

In reality, the ATU has used the 130 Cinder Bed workers as a bargaining chip in its maneuvers with WMATA over privatization. A striking Cinder Bed Road worker told the WSWS, “The ATU is gambling with us [workers]. The union should be doing what the workers want, instead it signed an agreement without our consent.”

Regarding the supposed “promise” that the ATU extracted from Transdev that it would not punish workers who had been on strike, the worker stated, “That’s our right anyway, we had the right to be on strike.”

Expressing disgust at the ATU’s order to return to work, the worker added, “The majority of drivers don’t even want to continue working if this is the way things are going to go.”

The ATU’s stab in the back to Transdev workers is only the latest betrayal of transit workers. In New York City, the Transport Workers Union (TWU) recently agreed to a sellout deal for 38,000 Metropolitan Transit Authority workers, who had been working without a contract for six months. The new TWU contract, if approved by the membership, will lead to an unprecedented expansion of outsourcing, along with attacks on healthcare, and paltry pay raises that do not keep up with inflation.

In order to win decent living standards, defend jobs and block privatization efforts for good, transit workers must organize independently of their unions through the building of rank-and-file committees. These committees must seek to expand struggles to all sections of the working class, both in the DC region, nationally and internationally.

It is crucial that workers understand they are not fighting simply one multinational company or a given transit agency, but the entire capitalist class, including its representatives in the Democratic Party. This raises the necessity for workers to adopt an independent political strategy based on a socialist program.

The WSWS *Transit Worker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party will provide every assistance to transit workers to form rank-and-file committees and establish lines of communication with other sections of workers in struggle. We urge you to contact the SEP and to attend an online meeting on Monday, December 23 at 8 p.m. EST to discuss the strategy needed for transit workers to fight back. To join the call, register here.



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