

DC Transit Authority and union approve public workers' contract, isolating striking private transit workers

Nick Barrickman
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On December 20, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority Metro Board (WMATA) approved a four-year contract for nearly 8,000 public transit workers. The contract was ratified the previous day by workers in Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 689, the system's largest union.

The contract, which was ratified by 93 percent of ATU 689 members, is being presented by WMATA and the union as putting an end to the privatization of transit operations. It declares that once all current outsourced contracts expire, WMATA will "transition back in-house."

The contract will also scrap the plan to privately operate WMATA's Silver Line extension, and vows to "transition" the privately-contracted bus garage on Cinder Bed Road back to public ownership once Metro's contract with the "public transit firm" Transdev expires in early 2022.

Since October, nearly 130 Metro bus drivers and mechanics at the privately-operated Cinder Bed Road garage in Northern Virginia have been on strike against unsafe working conditions, low pay and insufficient benefits. While Transdev employees operate WMATA buses and serve routes previously run by the public system, they receive pay that is substantially less than their public-sector counterparts and pay far higher health deductibles and other expenses.

The public Metro employees' overwhelming ratification of the contract reflects deep hostility to the privatization of job functions that has been implemented by WMATA, but the deal will do nothing to stop WMATA's attacks on the wages and benefits of metro employees. Instead, it will extend the low-wage regime in the private sector to the public system, while utilizing the ATU to enforce the attacks on the public workers.

There is no reason for workers to accept WMATA's promises to cease privatization. WMATA General Manager Paul J. Wiedefeld has routinely violated Metro's collective bargaining agreements with the ATU, contracting out work at will.

WMATA sold its Cinder Bed Road garage to Transdev in 2018 while the collective bargaining agreement forbidding privatization was still in force. The ATU permitted this move, mounting empty protests while ignoring votes from its membership to launch a strike against the attack.

The new contract provides for an average wage increase of 2.4 percent per year, which will be entirely eaten up by inflation. It promises an additional 1 percent wage increase if Metro's annual ridership grows by at least 2 percent in a year. This miserly incentive is based on the WMATA's bogus claim that the workers are to blame for the loss of riders in recent years. In reality, the decline in the riding public is due to underfunding, lack of maintenance and cuts in service.

The contract "restructures" the starting pay for cleaning staff from 70 percent of the maximum rate to 60 percent for all new-hires, a 15 percent wage cut. It thereby establishes a sub-standard second tier of workers.

In addition, WMATA will raise out-of-pocket health care contributions by retirees. Considering that "other post-employment benefits" such as health care are cited by financial officials as key threats to Metro's credit rating, which is contingent on WMATA keeping its operating budget growth under 3 percent per year, this concession opens the door to further cuts and the impoverishment of older workers and retirees.

According to the regional publication *Greater Greater Washington*, "In many years, even the cost of doing everything the same has risen by more than 3 percent, so

sometimes WMATA will have to cut just to stand still. Or even if not, doing one thing like restoring late-night service can force cuts or fare hikes elsewhere.”

Unsurprisingly, Metro officials were pleased with the contract. “After many months of negotiation, we reached a good deal for our employees that also provides our Board of Directors with an affordable option for bus and rail service for the next four years,” stated General Manager Paul Wiedefeld in a press release.

For its part, the ATU gloated in a December 20 press release that “thousands” of its members voted for the contract “with only a few days notice.” Doubtless, this short notice was by design on the part of the union, which did not wish to give its members adequate time to read and consider what was on offer.

The union declares that the deal provides “a path towards bringing the Cinder Bed Bus garage in-house while protecting the workers that work there now.” It then pivots to note that the agreement “does not immediately end the ongoing strike” at Cinder Bed because “[u]nfortunately, Transdev has not met our simple demands for written guarantees that the company will not retaliate and a commitment to good faith bargaining.”

Not only is the present workforce at Cinder Bed still under threat of retaliation, but the ATU obscures the real content of the deal regarding the Cinder Bed workers’ rehiring by WMATA. Under the heading “Transfers,” the agreement states that once Metro terminates its contract with Transdev, “former employees ... working at the Cinder Bed Road facility ... shall become employees of the Authority in the job classification held at the time of transfer, *provided, however, that such employees make application for employment under the Authority’s regular employment process and meet all the qualifications*” [Emphasis added].

In other words, their “path” to employment at WMATA is as fraught with uncertainty as that of anyone hired off of the street. Elsewhere, the contract states that these same workers will have the “one-time option” to “buy back” any pension amount to which they were entitled for their time at Transdev.

The ATU declares it “completely unacceptable” that Transdev has refused to meet again for negotiations until January 14, at which point the Cinder Bed workers will have been on strike without pay for nearly 90 days. Despite this empty protest, the ATU emphasizes that it is willing to end the strike immediately without a single workers’ demand being met so long as the company doesn’t “retaliate” and is committed to “good faith

bargaining.”

Finally, the ATU reiterates its demand for WMATA to intercede in the dispute and terminate its contract with the private firm.

In fact, WMATA has given its answer by continuing to pay Transdev the full amount for its contract while the company strings the workers along for months on the picket line. For its part, the ATU has scabbed on its own members, forcing its 7,500 public-sector members to remain on the job while the strike continues.

Earlier this month, a strike of 600 bus drivers in the parallel Fairfax Connector system, which is also operated by Transdev, was called off without a single demand being met after the strike raised the possibility of a unified struggle of transit workers in the Washington, DC area, one of the busiest regions in the United States.

It is imperative that the struggle for decent pay, retirement, health care and job safety be taken out of the hands of the ATU. If workers at Cinder Bed Road are to avoid a complete sellout and possible victimization, they must organize rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-management ATU, to mobilize the active support of their fellow workers in the Metro system and the greater region.

Appeals should also be made to New York City’s Metropolitan Transit Authority workers, who have been saddled with a tentative concessions contract that would give Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 a stake in the system’s profits, depending on its ability to increase the exploitation of its members.



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