

Drivers shut down Detroit bus system with sick-out over health and safety concerns during coronavirus outbreak

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The Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) was forced to cancel bus service on Tuesday morning when less than ten percent of city bus drivers reported for work due to health and safety concerns about exposure to the coronavirus.

In response to the action by the bus drivers, the city government posted a public advisory on its website and social media accounts at 7:00 AM that said DDOT “wishes to let passengers know that due to a driver shortage this morning, March 17, 2020, there will be no bus service. We are asking passengers to seek other forms of transportation while we work to address our drivers concerns. We apologize for the inconvenience.”

Workers objected to the lack of adequate protection by the city government and state governments amid the COVID-19 pandemic which has sparked a declaration of a state of emergency and the closure of schools, bars, restaurants, gyms and theaters by Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer.

Notably the sickout by bus drivers came just a day before autoworkers in Detroit and throughout the auto industry in Michigan and Ohio took part in their own wildcat job actions shutting down their plants over health and safety concerns in defiance of the of the United Auto Workers union and the Big Three—GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler—who sought to keep them on the job.

One driver told Local 4 News, “(The CDC) already said not more than 10 people in a setting. I carry 75 people at a time, on a bus yesterday standing up around me. No hand sanitizer, no gloves from the department.”

Drivers also said they were dissatisfied with the cleanliness of the buses and that the closing of the restaurants made it impossible for them to use the

restroom and wash their hands at the end points of their routes.

That the action was organized by the workers independently of the Amalgamated Transit Union was made clear when ATU Local 26 President Glenn Tolbert, AFSCME Local 312 President Phil Douglas and AFSCME Local 214 President June Nickelberry all appeared with Detroit Democratic Party Mayor Mike Duggan at a press conference in the afternoon claiming that all of the drivers’ concerns had been addressed.

Duggan declared that bus transportation would resume on Wednesday morning at 3:00 AM and that all passengers would ride free. Passengers would only be able to enter and exit buses from the rear door to minimize contact with the driver. The seats immediately behind the drivers would remain empty and DDOT would implement new cleaning procedures that included hiring additional staff and adding cleanings at terminals and end of lines.

Tolbert spent his time at the press conference apologizing for the bus drivers’ completely legitimate action. Rather than rally the widespread support for the drivers from the city’s working class to demand further actions to protect the health of Detroit residents, Tolbert spoke as a representative of the city government, stating “It was an unfortunate situation that happened today.”

Duggan also told the assembled media that he was awakened by a 5:30 AM phone call and met drivers at a city bus yard an hour later. Tolbert, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 26, said his call came even earlier, at 3 AM. Duggan followed up “This is what happens when you work together. We weren’t yelling. We weren’t hostile.”

That fact that workers acted on their own initiative was additionally confirmed by ATU Local 26 Vice President Willie Mitchell in a quote published by *Labor Notes*, the pseudo-left adjunct of the labor bureaucracy, “Some of our drivers were not comfortable with the cleanliness of the coaches so they didn't want to go to work until things were cleaner and better. They had been discussing it, they just decided they weren't going to work. They called us and asked us to stand by them, and that's what we do.”

In other words, the union leadership opposed the sick-out action by the workers and when the Local 26 officials were unable to stop it, they instead joined with the city government and pretended that they supported it.

The *LaborNotes* report made no mention of the unity of the bus drivers with Detroit residents who are facing the catastrophic spread of the coronavirus. Instead the publication fully identified itself with the union leadership and Mayor Duggan. This is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that union officials, Democrats and pseudo-left groups like *LaborNotes* come together against the growing struggle of the working class against the coronavirus health crisis.

Popular support in the working class for the drivers' action was expressed on the DDOT Facebook page. Most residents said that the proper cleaning of city buses was way overdue. One worker said, “No better for you DDOT!! GOOD THE DRIVERS STOOD UP FOR THEMSELVES,” and another remarked, “Stand for something or fall for anything.”

As of this writing, there are 119 confirmed cases in Wayne County where Detroit is located with two deaths and 105 cases in Oakland County to north of the city with one death. There are now 355 people in the state who have the coronavirus



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