

“As far as the rich are concerned everybody has got to get back to work and if someone dies, so be it.”

Detroit bus drivers stop work again over ongoing safety issues

Kathleen Martin
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For the second time since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Detroit bus drivers took matters into their own hands to protect their health and safety. Drivers shut down transit operations early Friday morning, citing the danger of exposure to COVID-19 and tensions with passengers. None of the issues that brought the transportation system to a halt due to mass driver sickouts in March have been addressed.

The Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) released a statement early Friday morning claiming that it is working with the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 26 to “get buses back on the road as soon as possible.” Glenn Tolbert, president of the ATU local, told the *Detroit News* that he was willing to continue discussions “until we got something resolved.”

“It’s getting to the point with COVID and all the other pressures... all of these things are just piling up,” he continued. “I’ve got people quitting on a daily basis.” Tolbert also stated that a passenger pulled a gun on a driver late Thursday night, one in a recent string of incidents involving violence against the drivers amid a desperate social crisis in the impoverished city.

The union has made no attempt to link the struggle of bus drivers with those of other sections of workers, including autoworkers who shut plants down over the spread of COVID infections in defiance of their union last March.

The wife of one bus driver told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “My husband treats the teens on the bus like his own, but he has been assaulted several times.

“The drivers are frontline essential workers, but they

are underpaid and treated like crap. The managers in the building are never on the buses and they have no idea what goes on. People use the buses to go to school and work, to get groceries or go to the hospital, but some kids just ride them because they are free, and sometimes they make trouble if you ask them to put on masks or social distance. It’s a fist now, but you don’t want it to be a bullet next time.

“It is very difficult. One of their coworkers has already died of COVID and a lot of others have gotten sick. The drivers are always communicating with each other to report incidents and protect themselves,” she said, referring to Jason Hargrove who died of COVID-19 in April, just days after posting a viral video on social media exposing the unsafe conditions inside the bus, including a passenger coughing on him and not wearing a mask.

One driver with over 20 years said, “In March, after our coworker Jason Hargrove passed away, Mayor Duggan came down here with a truckload of masks and PPE [personal protective equipment]. Where was all that before Jason died? Now when we are at our wit’s end, they roll out a prototype bus with protections.”

Another driver told the WSWs, “Management is firing guys who are just trying to protect themselves. It feels like it’s open season on bus drivers now. We could lose our lives from COVID or be hurt by an angry passenger. The city rolled out one new bus today that has protections for the drivers. But it’s only a prototype after more than six months of the pandemic.”

Bus drivers are square up against not just the immediate dangers posed by the virus, but also against

a major social crisis in the poorest large city in the country. Decades of attacks on pensions, health care, public education and infrastructure have resulted in massive inequality, turning the city into one of the nation's early epicenters of the pandemic, with a death toll of over 1,500. The median household income in Detroit, in 2018 dollars, is just \$29,481. Meanwhile, the billionaires profiting off the city's 2013 municipal bankruptcy are doing quite well. Dan Gilbert, real estate vulture and venture capitalist who owns virtually the entire city's downtown district, is worth just over \$45 billion.

In an effort to place the onus on workers, the city brought forward a proposal, which included training drivers on de-escalation techniques and involving the police department. This was rejected. Tolbert said that the PPE provided by the city of Detroit is not enough, and that "people are taking them at an alarming rate." In a city where thousands of residents lack access to clean water, the paltry resources made available at bus stops is sure to run out quickly.

One driver with nearly 20 years said, "A lot of the passengers are hungry and scared, but some of them are taking it out on the first person they see in the morning or the last person they see at night."

Her fellow driver added, "We've had to fight for PPE. We've lost a driver and several others were put into the ICU or even airlifted to save their lives. Dozens of retirees have died of COVID-19. We get a monthly magazine from the union and there are pages after pages of transit workers who have died from COVID all over the country. And it's happening to all workers. There were 19,000 workers infected at Amazon. As far as the rich are concerned everybody has got to get back to work and if someone dies, so be it.

"I think it's all about saving money from Social Security payouts. Ninety percent of the people who have died have been in nursing homes. If you die, they don't pay out benefits. They are also hiking up the retirement age all the time.

"After the bankruptcy of the city, the emergency manager took away medical benefits from city workers who retire. We used to get full benefits after working here 30 years no matter how old you were when you retire. If I hired in when I was 27 and worked 30 years, I wouldn't get anything. I would have to work eight more years to qualify for Medicare benefits."

Another driver added, "We are the lowest paid transit workers in the country. The starting pay for drivers is \$13.01. We are supposed to get raises in increments, but they are always withholding the increases. After 20 years working here, I'm only making \$19 an hour. That's why drivers work 60 hours or more a week just to pay their bills. Overtime is always available because they can't keep people. The turnover rate is worse than at McDonald's. So you work longer hours and increase the danger that you'll get sick or hurt on the buses."

None of the issues that led to the sickouts in March or to the wildcat action this week will be addressed by Detroit Mayor Duggan or the corrupt city council. We urge workers to form a rank-and-file safety committee independent of the ATU and the big business politicians to organize the fight for safe conditions and decent compensation. Detroit bus drivers should turn out to teachers, autoworkers, Amazon workers, and other sections of the working class to support for their struggle. The resources necessary for safe public transit should be secured by taxing the resources of Gilbert and the other billionaires in the city.

Bus drivers interested in forming a rank-and-file safety committee should reach out to the WSWs today for more information.



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