

# Transit union shuts down job action by Detroit bus drivers

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Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) bus drivers returned to work Monday after a three-day wildcat work stoppage over the lack of safety measures against the COVID-19 pandemic.

The leadership of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 26 worked over the weekend with DDOT management and the administration of Detroit Democratic Mayor Michael Duggan on a deal to shut down the walkout, which halted public transport in the city.

In announcing the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with management, Local 26 President Glenn Tolbert apologized for the work stoppage, declaring, “We look forward to serving you again, and we will be there.” In remarks to the press Tolbert sought to dissociate the union from the drivers’ action, insisting that he had encouraged them to return to their routes and that the union had nothing to do with the job action “because we do not strike.”

The drivers have taken the measure of the ATU, which has acted over the years as a pliant tool of management and the Democratic-run city administration. It has collaborated in the imposition of one concessions contract after another, including devastating cuts in the lead up to the 2014 Detroit bankruptcy that reduced starting pay to just \$12 an hour. It was the second job action since the COVID-19 pandemic swept through the city. DDOT drivers have been without a contract since 2018.

Detroit transit workers face daily hazards on the job, interacting with passengers in a city that has seen over 1,500 deaths from COVID-19. So far, one driver, Jason Hargrove, has died from the virus. The efforts of drivers to maintain social distancing on the buses have sometimes led to tense interactions with passengers and even threats or actual physical violence.

There are about 500 drivers in the city who transport an average of 85,000 riders daily on 48 fixed bus routes. In addition, there are twelve 24-hour routes and six express routes in the city of Detroit and neighboring communities.

On top of coronavirus, drivers face grueling schedules, a high turnover rate and abysmal pay. The starting pay for new drivers is just \$13.01 an hour for a job that is highly taxing. Drivers sometimes work as much as 60 hours a week to make ends meet. Overtime is often mandatory due to chronic staff shortages exacerbated by low pay.

The deal announced Sunday between ATU Local 26 and DDOT included largely meaningless changes that essentially serve only to pit DDOT workers against riders. Drivers will be offered “de-escalation training” when passengers exhibit violent or erratic behavior. In accordance with legal statutes, their right to self-defense is to be respected. Police response times are to be reduced.

Round after round of cuts have left only a bare bones public transit system in the city to serve an impoverished population. Workers in the city must rely on inadequate bus service to travel long hours to reach mostly low-wage jobs in the suburbs. Twenty-five percent of Detroit residents do not earn enough to own a car and must therefore rely on bus transport. The city has the highest cost of car ownership in the US. The average cost of car insurance is \$5,414 per year. Median family income in the city is a paltry \$26,249.

No issues such as pay or staffing or expanding service were addressed in the hastily signed and ratified agreement. Nor are serious measures being taken to upgrade buses, provide screening and ventilation for drivers or passengers.

The settlement was only an attempt at

“appeasement,” said the wife of a Detroit bus driver who contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site*. “See how the mayor reacted at the beginning? He was attacking the bus drivers.” She noted that he had threatened legal action, including a court injunction, to force a return to work.

She was upset that a driver who recently received a 29-day suspension for defending himself from an attack by an irate passenger still had charges pending after the settlement. “He [the passenger] was obviously coming to attack the driver. The driver had no way to get off the bus. What was he supposed to do, get hit?”

“Thirteen dollars an hour is Walmart pay. And they are more secure. My husband is definitely not making enough. The buses aren’t in the best shape. They need to be spending money on things that are right. The drivers are very devoted. They take a lot, but they do their job.

“The mayor only jumped out of his bed because the buses stopped running. I haven’t heard him talking about COVID-19 before this. He wanted to order the drivers back to work with an injunction.

“It’s going to get worse. It hasn’t even gotten cold yet. The buses are still freezing. They haven’t been fixed. They have a \$1 billion jail in Detroit, but they won’t spend money for the buses.”

She concluded by arguing in favor of uniting the struggle of transit workers with teachers and autoworkers. “We should unite everybody.”

The struggle by transit workers takes place as teachers and students in Detroit and other cities across the US are facing the reckless attempt to restart in-person classes in the midst of the pandemic. The urgent question is to unite all sections of workers around a common program in defense of health and safety.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges DDOT 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, adequate staffing and decent pay. The fight must be broadened to include autoworkers, teachers, logistics workers and other sections of the working class. The resources necessary for safe public transit should be secured by taxing the resources of Gilbert and the other billionaires in the city who have seen their stock portfolios mushroom during the pandemic.

If you are a bus driver and you are interested in

forming a rank-and-file safety committee, contact the WSWS today for more information.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**