

Washington D.C. metro dispatchers launch one-day strike over meager pay during COVID-19

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On Friday, May 14, 120 Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) contract workers struck briefly for higher wages. The strike of MetroAccess call center workers at the Dallas-based MV Transportation facility in suburban Washington D.C. is the first transit worker strike in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area since the beginning of the pandemic.

The MV Transportation call center workers, as with their bus and rail operator colleagues, had been forced to work the duration of the pandemic with little protection. Their contract had expired in 2020. On Monday, the workers voted by 97 percent for a strike.

According to an Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 689 press release, the workers had been offered a meager 1 percent pay raise in the company's latest offer. "MV workers at the MetroAccess Call Center have been abused and underpaid for more than a decade," stated ATU President John Costa in a press release. According to the ATU, "morale is plummeting, with turnover at near 100% and call outs so common that it's making an already bad system worse for riders with disabilities who rely on MetroAccess as a lifeline."

MV Transportation is the largest provider of paratransit services. This company handles reservations, scheduling and dispatches for MetroAccess, which provides door-to-door rides in vans for those who have disabilities and cannot take the transit system's buses or trains.

"We're done being disrespected," said an unnamed worker to the local online publication *DCist*. "They absolutely refuse to give us what we're worth." In April, the company's reported revenues exceeded \$500

million.

The MV Transportation strike is the first strike to hit the D.C. metro system since the strike of 120 bus operators and mechanical workers in late 2019-20 at the privately-operated Cinder Bed Road facility in Northern Virginia. It is also the first strike to hit the system during the pandemic. Demonstrating the militant attitude developing among the workers, a bus operator writing on the ATU's social media page commented: "I think we have strike envy. ... Everybody else striking except us."

The strike occurs amid a backdrop of widening social struggles in the United States and across the planet against corporate-government imposed austerity and the inadequate health protections provided for millions of working class people throughout the pandemic.

In addition to poor pay, workers are understandably furious at the transit system and its vast array of private contracting services for endangering their lives by failing to protect their health and safety. As of May 12 of this year, WMATA has reported 1,466 confirmed COVID-19 cases, with 1,398 who returned to work. According to its website, two workers are currently hospitalized, and five have died. "I've known two people who have passed away," a metro system bus operator told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "He caught [COVID-19] off of a customer. It was really terrible. He had two kids."

The ATU's media center in April published a report noting that 40 transit workers and 13 of its members died of COVID-19 complications, along with 1,500 confirmed cases. "Our members are getting infected at a rate that is higher than the general population, because we are continuously exposed to dozens of

riders at close range without adequate PPE to keep us safe. It's time for the FTA to secure PPE immediately and distribute the equipment directly to transit agencies at a reasonable cost," it stated.

That workers labor under such conditions is a testament not only to the criminality of the WMATA's leadership, but also the completely complacent and servile character of the ATU. Like the Cinder Bed Road strike before it, the ATU Local 689 ran a scab operation on the workers, keeping the privatized workers strung out on picket lines while it forced nearly 9,000 public sector transit workers to remain on the job.

No sooner had the strike started Friday than the ATU hastily called it off. Demonstrating the bureaucracy's fear that even a relatively minor work stoppage could create the impetus for a much larger movement of the working class, ATU President Costa announced Friday evening that the call center "workers have decided to return to work and continue negotiations tomorrow with the multinational company in hopes of reaching a deal soon." Speaking to the *Washington Post*, Costa said, "[t]here are still many issues to negotiate, but our riders come first and foremost for us."

Such mealy mouthed evasions contradict the union's stated goals for the strike. A few days earlier, ATU President Costa released a press statement declaring: "WMATA apparently doesn't care about riders with disabilities or the workers they rely on. If it did, there wouldn't be a private contractor here in the first place." No sooner is a struggle started than the ATU president sides with management in saying that the strike is hurting customers.

In fact, the ATU has regularly sabotaged its members' efforts to launch a united struggle against the transit system's outsourcing operations. In addition to the 2019-20 Cinder Bed Road strike, the ATU buried a strike ratification vote of 94 percent among public sector metro workers in 2018. Instead of honoring its members' demands for a fight against WMATA's violations of the system's then-standing contract, the ATU announced a "cooling off period" and allowed buses and trains to remain in operation, eventually nullifying the strike vote.

Throughout the pandemic, the company has threatened workers with layoffs due to its drop in ridership. A new budget of \$4.6 billion approved in April begins with an introduction from General

Manager and CEO Paul J. Wiedefeld. The WMATA general manager threatens "reductions of service, station closures [and] employee layoffs" if the company fails to obtain additional government bailout funding after fiscal year 2022.



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