

Beaumont, Texas transit workers reject contract and vote to authorize strike as refinery lockout continues through second month

Trévon Austin
15 June 2021

Transit workers in Beaumont, Texas have voted down a contract proposed by the city's transportation company and gave union officials permission to authorize a strike if negotiations break down. On Monday, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) said members of Local 1031 unanimously rejected what First Transit, the company, called its "final offer" for a new contract.

The contract between the ATU and First Transit's subsidiary, Transit Management of Beaumont, states that the union must provide a seven-day notice that it does not want to resume their monthly extension, which has been automatically renewed since the workers' last annual contract expired in October 2020. The union said the authorization vote does not mean it will call a strike, but it does give union leadership the ability to initiate one if an agreement is not reached.

The vote comes as a lockout of 650 ExxonMobil refinery workers in Beaumont continues into its second month. While the United Steelworkers (USW) union has isolated workers at the plant, the stand taken by transit workers shows the potential for a united struggle with other key sections of the working class.

The city of Beaumont hired First Transit to take over management of its transit system last year after the previous company declined to seek renewal of its contract. Since then, the company said it has met with the ATU about ten times to negotiate a new contract.

Company representatives told the *Beaumont Enterprise* that it had accepted additional terms to its original contract in the latest proposal workers rejected but did not disclose any details.

Transit workers have issued multiple demands that include a wage increase, measures to protect job security, and safety improvements. Workers said that nearly 90 percent of the city's buses are "unfit for service," after an in-depth safety survey was conducted between April 20 and May 3. Union officials stated that 16 out of the 18 vehicles inspected showed safety-related defects.

For example, the inspection found that:

- 50 percent of the vehicles had brake defects, including brakes that reacted too slowly or pulled the vehicle sharply in one direction.
- 88 percent of the vehicles had unsafe body defects, including cracked windows, broken mirror controls, broken windshield wipers and more.
- 44 percent of vehicles had problems with accessibility, such as malfunctioning kneeling systems and ramps for loading wheelchairs.
- 44 percent of vehicles had malfunctioning driver and passenger seats, including seat belts that would not unlock.
- More than a quarter of the vehicles had malfunctioning transmissions, lights, fire suppression systems or failing suspension.

Workers have been complaining about the safety issues for more than two years to no avail. Union officials also said that Beaumont does not have a body shop to send the buses for repair.

In an email, Transit Management of Beaumont spokesperson Jay Brock claimed that many of the workers' requests are out of the company's control because it can only manage resources provided and set

by the city of Beaumont.

“The additional funding request by ATU 1031, right now at more than \$1 million, is not within the approved budget issued from the City of Beaumont and used by First Transit, Transit Management of Beaumont,” Brock wrote. “The City of Beaumont is responsible for the financials, capital, and budget for the Beaumont Municipal Transit System, including all funding requests above the budgeted amount set for the current fiscal year, ending on September 30, 2021.”

Local 1031 has repeatedly called on the city to intervene in the dispute. The union organized a picket outside city hall in May to put forward issues and demands workers have stated they need for a safer and fairer workplace. However, workers have gotten little response from city officials.

At the same time, First Transit has continually told workers that the city is the only party that can answer their demands. Considering First Transit, a US subsidiary of the British multinational transit company, boasts of its “Maintenance Excellence” on its website, the company’s claims are difficult to believe.

According to its website, First Transit operates in over 300 locations, carrying more than 350 million passengers annually throughout 39 US states, Puerto Rico, Panama, India and four Canadian provinces. First Transit has more than 19,000 employees and operates and maintains more than 49,000 vehicles and pieces of equipment.

Meanwhile, officials from ExxonMobil and the United Steelworkers met for the first time in almost a month on Thursday. Transit workers from the ATU asked city officials to become involved in the dispute as well at their May picket.

The meeting reopened talks that ended unsuccessfully on May 12, but both parties say there was nothing new to discuss.

ExxonMobil Beaumont spokesperson Nakisha Burns in an email told the *Enterprise* that no new proposals were discussed at the meeting, and the company still offered its previously proposed six-year contract.

Workers have repeatedly stated ExxonMobil’s proposal was a nonstarter because it erodes job security and safety measures. Workers speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site* explained that ExxonMobil’s proposal would eliminate seniority procedures for 120 key positions. They said the change would drastically

reduce workplace safety.

Company officials have maintained that their proposed changes are necessary to modernize the Beaumont facility and “remain competitive.”

The two sides will continue to meet weekly on Thursday but expected negotiations may drag on for a while.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact