

Reno, Nevada bus drivers launch third strike in four months after rejecting Teamsters-backed contract

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For the third time in the last four months, some 200 bus drivers and transportation workers for the Reno-Sparks, Nevada, transit system went on strike after refusing the “last, best offer” from Keolis Corporation, a multinational transportation contractor with over 63,000 employees worldwide. The workers are all members of Teamsters Local 533, which has declared the latest strike an “unfair labor practices” strike.

So far, workers have struck over 42 days in the last four months. Despite the hardship caused by the lack of public transportation, community support for the bus drivers’ strike remains strong. On local social media groups and news reports, commentators voiced their support, telling drivers to “get every dollar they’re looking for.”

Teamsters Local 533 claims to represent about 2,200 workers throughout northern Nevada and eastern California, including roughly 200 Keolis employees. Members of Local 533, which includes bus drivers, road supervisors and mechanics, had previously struck on August 3 and on September 27, returning to work both times at the union’s direction without a contract, but instead with assurances on health care, wages and safety conditions. The third strike began on November 11 after members rejected by a 9-to-1 margin the last offer, negotiated by the Teamsters and the company.

Keolis was awarded a 10-year contract to operate bus services for Washoe County’s Regional Transportation Commission in April 2019 and began taking over bus operations in July 2019. The northwest corner of Nevada is home to nearly 500,000 people, including some 250,000 in Reno. Regional Transportation Commission Washoe (RTC Washoe) services some 20,000 people every day and roughly 7 million each

year.

The company had an estimated revenue of €6.6 billion, or US\$7.552 billion, in 2019 and is 70 percent owned by France’s national state-owned railway company, SNCF (Société nationale des chemins de fer français), and 30 percent owned by CDPQ (Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec), an institutional investor that was founded in 1965 by the Canadian National Assembly. Estimated revenue for SNCF was €30 billion in 2020, while CDPQ controlled an estimated €\$389.7 billion, or US\$309.7 billion, as of June 2021.

Despite the billions controlled by the international conglomerate and its owners, workers were forced to strike after the last contract offered by the company included a miserly 12 percent increase in pay spread out over three years of the contract. The yearly 4 percent raise, 2 percent less than the current rate of inflation measured at 6.1 percent this year, would in effect be a pay cut for the workers, who have toiled throughout the pandemic providing an essential service even as the coronavirus continues to spread unchecked throughout the country.

The first strike by workers in August 2021 concerned a proposal by Keolis to replace the union health care plan with a nonunion plan, while the second strike centered on workplace safety concerns, including the company’s failure to implement local, state and federal COVID-19 public health requirements, such as letting riders board without a mask, leading to the mass infection of workers. Workers have also accused the company of failing to alert them when they were in close contact with someone who was infected with COVID-19.

On the Teamsters 533 website, one driver reported

being disciplined by the company for asking a rider to wear a mask. Another driver was reprimanded for bringing in his or her own cleaning supplies where none were provided by the company, despite the fact that Keolis received some \$15 million in taxpayer funds through the misnamed CARES Act.

Starting wages for a bus driver in Reno begin at \$17 an hour, and according to job search engine Indeed.com, the average wage is only \$19.31 an hour, or just under \$40,000 a year. As is the case in cities throughout the US, Reno is suffering from a severe lack of affordable housing, leading to sky-high rents that average \$1,600 a month. Meanwhile, the current vacancy rate for rentals in Reno is 1.6 percent, compared to the national average of 5.8 percent.

The overwhelming rejection of this latest union-negotiated contract by the Reno workers echoes similar rejections of union-backed deals by autoworkers at Volvo's New River Valley plant in Dublin, Virginia, as well as Dana auto parts workers and factory workers at John Deere facilities across the US. The strike represents the latest expression of not only growing militancy in the working class and a desire to fight back against decades of givebacks to corporations but also a rejection of the authority of the so-called unions who purport to represent their members.

However, as shown at Volvo, workers cannot simply rely on their militancy and voting against union-backed contracts if they are to win what is rightfully theirs. The Teamsters union is employing a tried and true strategy to mill down resistance while pressuring workers to accept a rotten contract that does not meet their needs. Trying to stoke up nationalist sentiments, the Teamsters leadership is also encouraging its members to “pressure” the Reno City Council and local Democrats to pick a new, that is American, contractor to exploit workers.

As was the case at the beginning of 2021 with the powerful strike by Hunts Point produce workers in New York City, the Teamsters are looking to shut down the strike with the assistance of the Democratic Party. This was on display during this past Sunday's sparsely attended picket in Reno, which featured Nevada Democratic state lawmakers Susie Martinez (District 12), Bea Duran (District 11) Michelle Gorelow (District 35) and David Orentlicher (District 20).

The fight for improved wages, safer working

conditions and ending the pandemic requires a break with the rotten organizations that have overseen decades of austerity and the enforced the homicidal return-to-work campaign, which has led to over 5 million dead worldwide. This means breaking with the thoroughly corrupt trade unions and joining the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to take up the fight to unify the international working class, stop the pandemic and vastly improve working conditions in every industry.



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