

Orange County, California bus drivers set to strike this week

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Nearly 600 Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) bus drivers in Southern California are set to strike Tuesday, February 15, if negotiations with Teamsters Local 952 fail to produce an agreement before then. The previous contract expired almost a year ago, on April 30, 2021.

The drivers are fighting for substantial improvements to wages and break time. Drivers “can’t afford to live in Orange County,” Local 952 Secretary-Treasurer Eric Jimenez told the *Orange County Register*, forcing many OCTA workers to commute from Inland Empire. With prices for consumer goods spiking 7.5 percent over the previous year, the high cost of living in California is no doubt becoming even more untenable for drivers and their families.

Lack of regular restroom and meal break times is also a major concern for workers. The current pressures to stay on schedule have led drivers to humiliating situations in which they must urinate right outside the bus, eat a meal while using the restroom, or even wet themselves, according to interviews with workers published in *Voice of OC* earlier this month.

According to Jimenez, “Meals and break periods are not in drivers’ contract. There is no provision, language, article or section in the contract that spells out breaks or meal periods.” This admission, as well as his acknowledgement that drivers’ wages are inadequate to live in the county, is a damning indictment of previous contracts enforced by the Teamsters, and the leadership that negotiated them.

The abysmal conditions workers face are also an indictment of the present “Members First Slate” of President John Green and Treasurer Jimenez, which took over the leadership of Local 952 on January 1, 2020. Despite the previous contract expiring nearly a year ago, a strike authorization vote was not held until

last month. During this time the current leadership kept bus drivers on the job under the same brutal and dehumanizing conditions.

In the interim, two contracts have been voted down by members. The first, in September, was essentially the same as the previous contract, containing all of the same language with the exception of a 2 percent wage increase, far below the current inflation rate, leading it to be rejected by an almost unanimous margin of 486 to 5. The second proposed contract put before workers by OCTA and the Teamsters was again overwhelmingly rejected by a vote of 420 to 75.

In response to the announcement of a potential strike, OCTA Chairman Mark Murphy sent a letter to California Governor Gavin Newsom requesting that he intervene in the dispute to prevent a strike.

Under a reactionary California law, the governor can intervene in a strike or lockout if either would “significantly disrupt public transportation services and endanger the public’s health, safety, or welfare.” Given that on the day the strike is to begin the wearing of masks in California is to become voluntary, while COVID-19 remains widespread, such a request is entirely cynical.

If OCTA’s request is granted, Newsom could appoint a five-member board to “investigate” the labor dispute and report back to him in seven days, effectively blocking a strike for a weeklong “cooling off” period.

Additionally, OCTA has asked that Newsom immediately request the attorney general to seek a court order to prevent a strike for yet another 60-day period following the initial seven days.

In a sign that OCTA plans to proceed with a propaganda offensive aimed at vilifying workers as being responsible for the shutdown of public transportation in a predominantly working class area,

OCTA CEO Darrell Johnson said that “asking the state to intervene is not something we take lightly, but for the well-being and safety of our passengers, it’s critical we take all necessary measures to avoid disruptions to bus service.”

Similarly, in a previous statement, OCTA Chairman Mark Murphy said, “Any bus service disruption hurts those in our community who can least afford to be hurt at a time when access to transportation is critical.”

But the expressions of concern about “access to transportation” by OCTA executives are insincere and hypocritical, given the repeated cuts to bus service that have been carried out in the county in recent years.

Newsom, in line with the Biden administration and state governments across the US, is doing away with even the semblance of mitigating the effects of COVID-19, ending mask restrictions in California as of February 15. Such moves are aimed above all at ensuring profit-making can continue to the maximum degree.

Under such conditions, OCTA is appealing to Newsom to intervene to ensure business activity continues uninterrupted, and allow it and Teamsters Local 952 further time to attempt to push through yet another rotten contract.

Bus drivers should put no confidence in the leadership of Local 952. The Teamsters union is itself intimately tied to the political establishment bus drivers are up against, and Local 952 has already brought forward two contracts which workers have decisively rejected for being inadequate to meet their needs.

If bus drivers want to carry their fight forward, it is necessary to take matters into their own hands, through the formation of an independent rank-and-file committee, uniting with other workers struggling against poor conditions, poverty wages and brutal work schedules.



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