

Strikes break out among transit workers in the Washington, DC region

Nick Barrickman
4 May 2022

On Monday, nearly 200 drivers working for the privately-operated DC Circulator bus service went on strike against what Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689 called “lowball offers” in its ongoing negotiations with the six-route bus system’s drivers. The Circulator, which works alongside the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), the region’s premier bus and train service, drives several of the same routes as its larger public counterpart in the District of Columbia.

Despite this, drivers at the Circulator make \$5.38 less on average than WMATA’s public drivers, in one of the country’s most expensive metropolitan areas. Negotiations between ATU 689, representing 15,000 members in the D.C. area, and RATP Dev USA, the Circulator’s operator, have been ongoing since March.

“RATP Dev has repeatedly refused to pay what other bus operators in this region already make, instead focusing all of its energy on increasing starting pay rates so they can find new operators,” the ATU says.

The contractor has offered its workers a meager 6 percent wage increase over three years. Under conditions of inflation levels at 8 percent nationally, this amounts to an almost-20 percent wage cut over the course of the contract. A May 1 “final offer” proposed to take away rights associated with the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), allowed the use of subcontractors and eliminated the concept of “progressive discipline,” in which workers can be punished harshly for first infractions.

In a provocative move, the contractor has reportedly hired the same negotiators that the multinational corporate contractor Transdev used during a strike of 120 Metrobus drivers in 2019-2020. That strike resulted in WMATA abandoning its relations with Transdev and bringing the striking workers in-house

once more.

On Wednesday, RATP Dev declared that it had “made progress on wages and other terms and will continue to work together... to end this work stoppage,” while an ATU spokesperson said that it is “up to them {the company}” if a deal was reached. In the absence of a deal, the next negotiating time will be in two weeks.

The strike, despite its limited number of participants, has significantly impacted transit in Washington, D.C. According to the *Washington Post*, “[s]ome commuters were... confused Wednesday about buses not showing up, taking to social media to call on the system to better communicate its status.”

This comes amid an already-serious disruption of transit services in the region’s public sector, the result of an ongoing defect in WMATA’s widely-used 7000 series rail cars.

Despite the transit workers’ leverage, the ATU has revived its bankrupt strategy from the 2019 Transdev strike. Under conditions of immense support for a unified struggle, the ATU has only called out a relative handful of its members on strike. This leaves its far larger public sector membership to continue to work and, in fact, undermine the impact of the Circulator strike.

“These (the Circulator drivers) are the same guys at our local meetings. They work on the same streets as us,” said a WMATA worker to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “There’s a lot of dissatisfaction [among members] with what is happening [at ATU 689],” they said. “Everything is ‘top down.’ Their own members don’t even find out what they’re going to do until they announce it to the public.”

The ATU, instead of appealing to its own members, has instead called upon the District of Columbia’s Department of Transportation (DDOT) to force “RATP

Dev to get serious about bargaining in good faith and put real money on the table.” This is despite having to admit only a few sentences later that it is “frustrated that DDOT would publish press releases based on whatever RATP Dev tells them, despite DDOT claiming for over a year that they are unable to legally talk with Local 689.”

This is another hapless tactic drawn straight from the Transdev strike playbook. While the ATU appeals to the city authority to put pressure on the offending contractor, the local government openly sides with the latter against the workers. In 2019, this also took the form of the ATU promoting local Democratic Party politicians’ calls for WMATA to end the strike by creating “transportation alternatives,” meaning the hiring of scabs to offset the walkout’s impact.

This duplicitous strategy continues in the Circulator strike, with the ATU inviting local Democratic Party politicians to bolster their “labor-friendly” credentials by paying visits to the picket line amid an ongoing mayoral election. But these so-called “friends of labor” are seeking to impose devastating cuts to jobs, pay and public services amid the ongoing transit system crisis.

Finally, by calling the strike due to “unfair labor practices” and RATP Dev’s “bad faith,” the ATU reserves the right to end the walkout at any time on the grounds that sudden “progress” in negotiations has been made.

This is under conditions where a wave of strikes has erupted throughout the United States and internationally. Working people are increasingly demanding wages and supports that offset the impact of inflation caused by the pandemic and the disruption of supply chains due to the US-backed war in Europe.

In the Washington, D.C. region and in transit, this has taken the form of a one-day walkout of Metrobus call center workers and a threatened strike of 5,000 Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) which was narrowly averted by the Transport Workers Union last year.

While the Circulator drivers go out on strike, at Sysco Baltimore, located in the Washington, D.C.-Baltimore suburb of Jessup, Maryland, nearly 300 delivery drivers and warehouse workers also began a strike last Wednesday after months of contract negotiations between the global food and kitchenware distributor and Teamsters Local 355 broke down.

Workers are demanding an end to mandatory work shifts during holidays and other abusive practices. 'We have problems (with) the way they treat the men down (at) Sysco. It's always been that way,' said Ron Daniels to WBALTV. Daniels, who worked for the corporation for nearly a half-century, stated that it was the first time he recalls being on strike. According to WBALTV, “there is no word” on when a resolution could be reached to end the strike.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact