Washington D.C. transit union calls off 3-day strike, agrees to below-inflation wages for 150 D.C. transit workers

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On May 5, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 689 announced the end of a three-day strike by 150 DC Circulator bus operators after agreeing to a new three-year contract with private operator RATP Dev.

Circulator drivers, who serve similar routes as their public sector counterparts, want wage and benefit parity with other transit workers in the Washington D.C. metro area. Their strike emerged as tens of thousands of other workers have launched strikes throughout the country, protesting low wages amid the backdrop of rising inflation and cost of living.

"After a unified and strong three-day strike, ATU Local 689 bus operators for the DC Circulator voted overwhelmingly to approve a collective bargaining agreement," the ATU boasted on Facebook. Local 689 cited "health care improvements, better retirement benefits, and substantial wage increases," including a starting pay level "raised over 25% immediately to address the bus operator shortage."

In addition, "[o]perators at top pay will receive 18.5% increases over the course of the contract. Retirement was changed from an employer match system to a direct employer contribution to a member's 401(k)."

Despite the boasting, the contract contains cuts to real wages when inflation is factored in. The three-year contract provides for wage increases of roughly 6 percent for top-tier drivers, compared to current levels of inflation of 8.3 percent. Prior to the strike, the ATU itself acknowledged that "[w]ith years of being underpaid and inflation north of 8%, we knew this contract would need strong wage and benefit improvements to correct the mistakes of the past."

The increase in the new starting pay for drivers—from $18.54 to $24.50—means bus operators still will not be able to afford to live within the region. According to *Apartmentlist*, "the mean annual wage in the DC Metro area is $90,842 or $45.82 hourly." A one-bedroom apartment's rent is $2,508, "meaning a DC resident should make at least $8,146 monthly or $100,320 annually before taxes."

In contrast, even with an hourly wage of $24.50, drivers will make $50,960, or roughly *half* of the required living amount for the city in which they work.

RATP Dev Executive Stacy Winsett praised the agreement in the *Washington Post*, saying the company was "grateful for all the hard work and time that was put in" on the contract and that '[w]e are glad this was resolved quickly." This statement underscores the huge profits the company anticipates during the three-year contract.

The deal makes a mockery of the Local 689 president's claim that transit agencies "across the country are now on notice." In fact, the ATU isolated the strike and refused to call out other transit workers from the same local to support it.

The ATU is terrified of disrupting transit services throughout the city under conditions where the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) is facing a significant budget crisis.

The strike itself was limited to 150 bus operators, affecting only some of the routes serviced by the Circulator. In the middle of the strike on May 3, Circulator tweeted alternative bus routes for riders to use until the strike was over without a word of protest from the union.

This mimics the role other trade unions have played throughout the pandemic. Rather than mobilizing members for a decisive confrontation with the employers who are forcing workers to risk life and limb for profits amid a deadly pandemic, they have sided with management against their own members.

If the strike did result in some moderate gains, it was because the miserably low wages that the company was paying before the strike threatened its ability to retain drivers. Indeed, this was acknowledged by the ATU itself when it stated the purpose of the 25 percent immediate pay bump is “to address the bus operator shortage.”

The entire public transit system in Washington D.C. is facing a crisis caused by a loss of ridership during the pandemic. According to *DCist*, “[b]us ridership has returned to about 60% of pre-pandemic levels, with about 290,000 rides per day on recent weekdays. Rail ridership is at about 37% of pre-pandemic numbers, with 230,000 rides on recent weekdays.”

The WMATA “faces a $300 million budget gap starting next year when federal coronavirus relief funds run out,” even as more commuters have taken to the transit system in order to save money on gas. In an article last week, the *Post* noted “tough choices lie ahead without ridership recovering to pre-pandemic levels or another financial infusion.”

This crisis has been compounded by the forced removal of over 60 percent of the rail system’s fleet due to a defect in the wheel bases of the widely used 7000 Series train cars. The loss of hundreds of trains has led to overly-crowded cars under conditions where coronavirus variants are rapidly circulating in the region. This has led to a further loss of ridership.

To compound the crisis, on Sunday it was announced that the Washington Metrorail Safety Commission (WMSC) “identified lapses in recertification” for over half of the system’s train operators, leading to the immediate removal of 72 of them. The resulting loss of qualified operators left train services “delayed beginning Monday,” wrote WTOP.

WMATA General Manager Paul J. Wiedefeld and Chief Operating Officer Joseph Leader announced their immediate resignations following the rail system mishap. Wiedefeld, who was due to retire in late June, moved up his retirement date following the latest scandal.

Weidefeld will be replaced by Interim General Manager Andy Off until his replacement, Randy Clarke, formerly of the Austin, Texas-based Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority, fills the position in July.

Undoubtedly, the goal of WMATA and regional officials will be to place the burden of this crisis on the backs of the workers and the public. The ATU will not lift a finger to fight this process. As it has done throughout the pandemic, the ATU will throw itself at the mercy of Congress by begging for emergency cash infusions. When appeals to the Democratic Party fail to resolve the issue, it will turn on its members and assist management in delivering the budget cuts.