

MetroAccess workers ratify vote to go on strike in Washington D.C. as transit system's financial crisis becomes critical

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On June 30, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 689 announced that MetroAccess workers returned an overwhelming 96 percent vote in favor of authorizing a strike, “if necessary,” to obtain a better contract with their contractor Transdev.

According to the ATU, the current contract, ratified in 2017 for “over 200 paratransit drivers, utility, dispatchers, maintenance workers, and road supervisors” expired on June 30. The workers serve MetroAccess, the Washington, D.C. public ride-share program for disabled riders managed by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), and operated out of the Hubbard Road facility in Landover, Maryland.

Local 689 listed various grievances in their press release, such as “low pay, mismanagement, mistreatment, and poor working conditions” at the contracting firm. Workers at the paratransit service earn around \$16 an hour, a sub-minimum wage in the highly expensive Washington D.C. area.

“Workers are forced to choose from schedules with up to 58 hours of work each week,” the statement reads. This is supposedly in order “to address... short-staffing.” However, “it is now clear that Transdev has no real strategy to address their worker recruitment and retention issues.”

The Local asserts that the staffing problems are the product of “a shortage of employers willing to pay their workers wages and benefits that respect their value.” Workers are making less in the more expensive Washington D.C. area than counterparts in Baltimore, Maryland, where MetroAccess workers earn around \$20 an hour. Local 689 stated that Transdev has offered a \$4,000 sign-on bonus that “failed to convince anyone

to take these stressful jobs.”

Transdev's latest published financial results stated that “2021 was a year of recovery.” It reported a growth in revenue of about €7 million, or 3.8 percent compared to the previous year. Furthermore, it noted that 2021 was an “excellent year in terms of commercial wins globally and various states in the United States.” The United States accounted for 13 percent of its annual revenue.

The strike authorization by MetroAccess workers comes amid WMATA's impending financial crisis. A WMATA committee meeting summary published in June pointed out that the transit agency faces a \$356 million deficit for the 2024 Fiscal Year.

Paul Smedberg, Chairman of Metro's Board of Directors and Commissioner of the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission (NVTC), warned that the agency needs to find a new funding model as its present one is not sustainable. The same day the report was released, Metro announced plans to close its sales office.

An article published Monday in the George Washington University-based publication *DCist* states “the \$2.6 billion in federal dollars provided since the pandemic began are running out.” Ridership, whose fares pay for up 35 percent of the system's operating budget, is only at 42 percent and 60 percent of pre-pandemic norms for rail and bus, respectively.

“This time,” the publication states, “Metro officials are not banking on the cavalry—in the form of a federal bailout or additional local dollars—to arrive.” Instead, “this summer, board members and new Metro General Manager Randy Clarke will begin to calculate how to plug a \$356 million operating budget gap.” This will

involve three choices: “service cuts, fare increases, layoffs, or most likely, some combination of all three.”

The crisis on the financial side is being compounded by safety failures on the service side. Metro announced via Twitter on Wednesday that they are withholding the return of eight of their defective 7000-series railcars from service. This represents a complete turnaround from Metro announcing the return of these rail cars last month.

The eight railcars are part of the defective 7000-series railcar fleet, which was recalled by the National Transportation and Safety Board (NTSB) after three derailments, one deemed potentially “catastrophic,” that left 187 passengers stranded between two train stations in Northern Virginia.

Despite the fiscal and safety concerns, Metro announced on June 23 that it received the transfer of management of the new “Phase 2” extension of the Northern Virginia Silver Line from the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority (MWAA), which adds nine new stations in Northern Virginia and aims to connect the transit system directly to Dulles Airport in the Northern Virginia suburbs. The project, begun nearly a decade ago, is worth roughly \$10 billion and will serve wealthier areas in the region.

While ATU Local 689 criticizes WMATA for the “privatization of public services,” the local has continuously retreated from a confrontation against WMATA. This includes ATU 689’s deliberate ignoring of a strike ratification vote in summer 2018 after WMATA began outsourcing its operations in violation of the local contract that was in effect.

The impotence of ATU 689’s posturing was so transparent that contractor Transdev, which the local accuses of “repeatedly [trying] to profit off of the work of our members, public taxpayer dollars, and payments from the riding public,” was able to sign an \$89 million privatization scheme at a Metrobus depot in Northern Virginia while the local suppressed its own members’ desire for a strike.

This duplicitous policy continued in 2019 when the local leadership was forced to call for a limited strike at the same bus depot. While Local 689 now proudly refers to the “85 day long strike at WMATA’s Cinder Bed Bus Garage... that ended [WMATA’s] privatization plans,” it is now clear that not only did privatization continue, but that the ATU forced the vast majority of

the transit system’s public *and* private sector workers to stay at work, weakening the strike’s impact.

The latest developments in the transit system show that this occurred even when ATU members were employed by the same private contractor. Writing at the time in 2019, the *World Socialist Web Site* accused the ATU of “running a scabbing operation on its 130 Cinder Bed Road members, forcing workers in the broader Metro system to remain at work.” These charges have been thoroughly confirmed.

If the Hubbard Road MetroAccess workers were to be permitted to strike by the ATU—and it has not yet declared a strike despite their contract having been expired for nearly two weeks—they would doubtless face similar scabbing operations at the hands of Local 689.

Furthermore, ATU Local 689 and its affiliates have remained silent in the face of the transit system’s deepening financial crisis, with no strategy to resist the looming cuts to services and jobs.

The working-class opposition to privatizing public services and the attack on living standards amid skyrocketing inflation can only be effectively mobilized on the basis of workers first organizing independently of their unions through the building of rank-and-file committees. These committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, must fight to link their struggle to similar fights waged by transport workers, as well as other sections of workers throughout the region and beyond.

We encourage all transit workers eager for such a fight to get in contact with the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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