

2,200 transit workers strike commuter bus lines in Greater Toronto region

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More than 2,000 GO Transit bus drivers, mechanics, station attendants, safety officers and office personnel, members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1587 in Toronto, Ontario, went on strike Monday after rejecting a tentative agreement presented to them by their union executive last week. Workers voted down the proposed deal by an overwhelming 81 percent. The union presented the contract without a recommendation to either accept or reject.

Workers have been seeking a new contract in negotiations that began April 1. After the collapse of last-minute negotiations this past weekend, ATU officials moved to file an Unfair Labour Practices complaint with the Ontario Ministry of Labour.

The strike is the first in the history of the GO bus system. As ATU members also operate local municipal bus routes that share bus stops and stations with the wider GO Transit network, drivers employed by the municipalities have altered their stop locations so as not to cross GO bus picket lines.

The GO Transit system, owned by provincial Crown Corporation Metrolinx, transports passengers throughout the Greater Toronto Area and to destinations as far away as Peterborough, Hamilton, Kitchener and Niagara Falls. The bus system transports about 4.2 million riders a year. The Metrolinx GO Train network, organized under other union contracts, which also services southern Ontario commuters will not be affected by the walkout.

Workers have cited the lack of proper job security and contracting out provisions in the rejected contract as major sticking points which the company has consistently refused to address. In last-minute negotiations prior to the strike, Metrolinx management, underestimating the militancy of its workforce, had told union representatives that GO Transit bus drivers

would not accept a strike. However, bus services came to a grinding stop once the strike was called.

The issues surrounding contracting out and job security are paramount. Metrolinx can sidestep weaker contract language by contracting jobs to outside companies which can employ workers with little experience and on temporary non-union contracts. This not only presents increased safety issues throughout the sprawling bus network but also provides Metrolinx management with a wedge to reduce wages and working conditions throughout the network.

Observers have noted that the insistence by Metrolinx management to defend their ability to use casual labour is tied up with schemes amongst elements within the governing provincial Conservative Party of Premier Doug Ford to make the network more attractive for privatization.

The bus transit workers' strike on Monday morning joined with 55,000 provincial education workers who walked out last Friday after the Ford government attempted to force another massive concessions contract on these low-paid workers.

Ford's government on Thursday had passed legislation to illegalize any education workers strike even before it had started. The legislation also allowed the government to unilaterally impose a miserable contract on the workers and hand down exorbitant fines on the educators' union as well as individual members. As the legislation violated workers' Charter Rights to bargain freely, Ford also made the unprecedented step of invoking the constitutional Notwithstanding Clause, to avoid legal scrutiny.

With outrage amongst working people growing across the province and indeed the entire country, Ford Monday withdrew anti-collective bargaining legislation. In return, Canadian Union of Public

Employees leaders agreed to call off the powerful strike that was moving out of their control toward a province-wide general strike and destabilizing the ruling Progressive Conservative government.

The GO Bus strike and the struggle of the education workers is only the beginning of a working class offensive against broad assaults on wages and working conditions that in the weeks and months ahead will draw into struggle hundreds of thousands of teachers, public servants and private sector workers. In order for these battles to be successful workers need to build their own rank-and-file committees independent of the official union bureaucracies, which consistently act to smother a broad working class offensive against concessions contracts, social services cuts and a relentless attack on the living conditions of workers everywhere.



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