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Teamsters pauses 4-day strike by bus mechanics fighting for wages, medical care in Orange County, California

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7 November 2022

A four-day strike by 150 mechanics, machinists and service technicians against the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA), that began on November 2 was paused by Teamsters Local 952 on November 6. The powerful job action by this pivotal section of the working class shut down public bus transportation on 50 routes in the Southern California county with a population of over 3 million.

The union’s spokeswoman Margie Stites told the press on Monday, “The pause gives people who depend on public transit a time to vote,” on November 8, the day of the midterm election. But the real reason for this bureaucratic maneuver was to bolster OCTA management and prevent the strike from spreading. The mechanics had the full support of the OCTA’s 1,000 bus drivers and UPS drivers, members of the same local, who were honoring the picket lines in a powerful show of solidarity. This meant that no buses were on the streets for four days, affecting over 100,000 daily riders. The solidarity among workers surprised the company and both union bureaucracies.

The strike was gathering popular support in a county that is adjacent to the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, where thousands of dockworkers have been working without a contract since June 30. Some 48,000 University of California graduate student workers are also poised to strike on November 14.

The 150 mechanics that are covered in the current contract negotiations perform a variety of functions from fixing and rebuilding engines and transmissions to refueling buses, or replacing broken headlights, brakes, or seats. Workers have been laboring without a contract since September 30.

“Depending on whether we reach an agreement with OCTA, the picket lines may go up again this week,” the union wrote in an online update on Monday.

Teamsters bureaucrats and company representatives have held at least 25 meetings since May in an attempt to sap workers’

resolve and force through an austerity contract, while preventing a strike.

The main concerns among workers were pay raises that do not keep pace with inflation and higher health care costs. Workers are refusing to accept the transportation authority’s derisory offer of an immediate 5 percent raise for 2022, another 4.7 percent on October 1, 2023, and an additional 4.5 percent raise starting October 1, 2024. As is the case throughout the United States and internationally, the bus workers are faced with historic inflation, exceeding 8 percent. This means these so-called “pay raises” represent a substantial cut in real wages, especially considering additional rising health care costs proposed by the OCTA.

On Friday, WSWS reporters spoke with a bus driver employed at the Santa Ana yard who came to picket at the Irvine yard. “I’ve been a driver for almost four years,” he said. “Yes, I’m supporting the mechanics. Without the mechanics you got no buses. If the bus breaks down, what are you going to do?”

The driver explained that he was originally from Venice, Italy. “My mother was a socialist. She was a leader in the nurses union and fought in the nurses strikes during the 60s, 70s and 80s, during the BS when doctors had full authority and nurses were treated like sh***. That’s what she did. She fought for them. She was on the front lines. She fought for them to get good wages and to work five days and get two days off. Before that it was always work, work, work.”

A mechanic told WSWS reporters, “The drivers are supporting us. I’m surprised that we’re getting a lot of support, I mean, a lot of support. There’s been a lot of people that drive by, especially at the other locations where there’s more traffic, they are honking in support. The fire department flipped on their lights and honked for us. UPS is not delivering.”

This mechanic also commented further on the situation, stating: “Our contract has expired, and management is refusing

to offer retro pay back to the date of the contract. They won't even consider it. So it's just to their advantage to keep delaying the contract. We should have had a new contract on October 1 with an increase. So if we sign today, there's no increase for all of October. So the more they delay, the less they're going to pay us."

He added, "We are all in different departments. I think we're underappreciated, personally. You have to have a lot of knowledge. And we're working around chemicals. You can easily get hurt working around some of that machinery if you're not really careful."

"During COVID, most of the management was at home, and we still had to go in. But especially the service workers who fuel and clean the buses, they're on the front lines, you know. The public was using the buses, and then they had to go in there at night and clean everything. They weren't rewarded for doing that. All management was working remotely from home."

The mechanic concluded, "What throws me off a little bit is that this is a nonprofit county agency, but they treat it like they're on the stock exchange, but it's all about money, profits, profits. But it's not, but that's the way they run it."

"And they're really generous to themselves. And there are opportunities for bonuses besides that don't show up in salaries."

As workers continue to strike and negotiations continue to stall, calls for government intervention from local Orange County politicians are being discussed openly in the press, with Orange County Board Chairman Doug Chaffee, who also serves on the OCTA board, stating Thursday, "The governor's been called, but he's declined to invoke the power he has to temporarily stop the strike," Chaffee said.

A shop steward and mechanic at the Irvine maintenance yard explained the importance of the health care demand. "Currently, our maintenance employees are paying upwards of 20 percent for insurance coverage. And they don't want to cost-share with us because we're in the Labor Alliance, the union-provided insurance which the company has been in for 26 years. It's a good plan and has lower deductibles and more choices. We offered to do some sort of cost-sharing, where if the amount of the premium surpasses what was negotiated, say it goes up \$100 per month past that premium agreed upon share, we said, 'let's share the cost 50/50.'

"They said 'No.' You employees have to pick up any additional costs even though you don't know how much it's going to go up in three years. We are not willing to share those costs."

When discussing wages, he said: "It's the same wages that they gave us three years ago. In this environment, they offered us three-quarters of one percent more over a three-year period than what we accepted three years ago. When we negotiated the contract in 2019, they've only kicked in another three-quarters of one percent for the next three-year contract. Total! That's one-quarter of one percent per year more than the last three-

year contract. A quarter of a percent!

"And they want us to pick up our insurance. We have guys that are making low \$20 an hour as service workers that are paying \$350 a month out of pocket. That's \$2 an hour. If you base that on a 2,000-hour year and do the math, it's \$2 an hour."

"Our CEO Darrell Johnson makes over \$600,000 a year. His counterpart in the Los Angeles MTA [Metropolitan Transportation Authority] makes less than Darrell. His executive board in the OCTA make more than their counterparts at the LA MTA. We are \$10 behind per hour. Compared to the mechanics working for the MTA, our mechanics make \$10 an hour less. And this has been going on for years."

"And we're not even asking to be the same. We're asking can we get closer. We have better performance, and our buses are in better condition. The answer was 'No.' We need a better raise because everything's so expensive," he added. "Cost of living is sky high. They decided for us what was enough, a quarter percent more in wages more than three years ago and no improvement in our health care."

He then stated that many employees who work in public transit in Orange County, one of the priciest areas in Southern California, cannot afford to live there. Many are commuting from more affordable areas, such as the Inland Empire, even as overall gas prices and cost of living are at an all-time high.

The WSWS urges the OCTA mechanics and bus drivers to learn about the campaign of Will Lehman, a socialist autoworker who is running for United Auto Workers president. He is fighting for the formation of rank-and-file committees in all industries and fighting for the international unity of the working class to fight for an agenda based on the needs of workers, not the profit interests of the corporations. Build an independent rank-and-file committee among transportation workers to fight for your needs, not those dictated by the company and pro-corporate union bureaucrats.



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