

# ATU ends Toronto-area GO Bus workers strike, seeks to impose Ford's wage-cutting Bill 124

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A tentative agreement was reached between Local 1587 of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and provincial Crown Corporation Metrolinx on November 10. After announcing the three-year wage-cutting deal, the ATU immediately ended a four-day strike by 2,200 GO Transit bus operators, mechanics, safety officers, station attendants and office personnel.

The strike was the first ever for the workers employed in the GO Bus division of Metrolinx. The work stoppage began after workers overwhelmingly rejected an earlier tentative agreement placed before them in late October without union recommendation.

Unwilling to defy the Ford government over wages even amid soaring inflation, ATU negotiators sought to win contract language in any new deal that would restrain Metrolinx management from continuing their practice of contracting out mechanical work to less-trained, low-paid non-union employees of third-party companies. Contracting out threatens the safe maintenance of the bus fleet, placing workers and the public at risk, and opens the door to at least partial privatization of jobs within the bargaining unit.

Although details of the new contract have not yet been released, Metrolinx and the ATU are claiming that this issue has been “resolved.” However, due to the ATU bureaucracy’s acceptance of the 1 percent annual pay increase cap contained in the provincial Progressive Conservative government’s Bill 124, GO Bus workers will see their real wages precipitously decline over the life of the contract should they ratify it. Metrolinx probably calculated that the massive wage concessions offered up by the ATU bureaucracy effectively outweighed the financial benefits of unrestrained outsourcing. If inflation continues at its

current rate over the coming three years, Go Bus workers would see their real wages fall by upwards of 20 percent.

Underscoring the determination of the ATU bureaucracy to bring the strike to a rapid conclusion, ATU International President John Costa travelled to Toronto to participate in the talks. The ATU has over 35,000 members in Canada and has been complicit in decades of attacks on the wages and conditions of transit workers, including over 10,000 workers at the Toronto Transit Commission.

Go Transit passenger bus service re-started on November 12. However, workers were expected to begin returning to their jobs the day before, even though they had not yet had the opportunity to view and discuss the new tentative agreement, let alone vote on it.

The Go Transit system transports passengers throughout the Greater Toronto Area and to destinations as far away as Peterborough, Hamilton, Kitchener and Niagara Falls. The bus system moves about 4.2 million riders a year. The Metrolinx GO Train network, organized under other union contracts, which also services millions of southern Ontario commuters, was not affected by the strike.

The beginning of the strike briefly overlapped with a powerful movement of workers across Ontario against the right-wing, Doug Ford-led Tory government. Only days before the GO Bus strike began, more than 55,000 low paid education workers in the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) defied provincial anti-strike legislation and walked off their jobs on November 4.

In defying Ford’s authoritarian “Keeping Students in Class Act” (Bill 28), the education support workers

struck a powerful blow on behalf of the entire working class. Millions of workers rallied to their support because they rightly recognized that the Ford government's class war assault on the education workers, the majority of whom earn less than \$39,000 per year, targeted the entire working class in Ontario and across Canada.

Bill 28 pre-emptively outlawed a strike and imposed by government decree contracts that cut workers' real wages, slashed sick pay and gutted job security. In an admission that it trampled on basic democratic rights, Ford invoked the "notwithstanding clause"—an authoritarian clause of Canada's constitution that allows governments to adopt laws that violate rights supposedly guaranteed by Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

With calls for a general strike growing across the working class, trade union leaders from virtually every major union including the ATU, fearful of a burgeoning movement that was undermining their own role within the ossified collective bargaining system, appealed to the increasingly unstable Ford government to withdraw its anti-strike law and the decreed contracts. In return, the union bureaucrats promised that CUPE would end the education workers' walkout. The lifeline to Ford was quickly accepted and the CUPE leadership instructed the strikers to return to work on November 8 without so much as consulting the membership. Less than three days later the ATU reached a settlement with Metrolinx. CUPE remains at the bargaining table with the Ford government, having massively scaled back its original wage demands.

GO Bus employees, like the education workers and all provincial public service workers, were subject to Ford's draconian wage restraint legislation, Bill 124, which limits wage increases to only 1 percent per year for three years, beginning in late 2019. Because the last Go Bus workers' contract was negotiated before Bill 124 was adopted, they are only subject to its onerous wage-cutting provisions now—at a time when inflation is far higher than in 2019.

The Ontario Federation of Labour and its affiliates, like CUPE, the four teachers' unions, and the ATU, have routinely denounced Bill 124 and called on the government to repeal it. But in practice they have policed it.

Last week, as the Ontario government was forced to

make a tactical retreat and pledge to repeal its savage Bill 28, the unions made no mention of their "Repeal Bill 124" campaign. Nor did the ATU leaders advance any plan to challenge the legislation with industrial action.

All the unions are opposed to mobilizing the working class against Bill 124. Apart from their occasional pleas to Ford for its repeal, the unions insist that the only thing that can be done to "fight" Bill 124 is to mount a constitutional challenge through the pro-employer court system. That court case, which began two months ago, is ongoing and likely to be ultimately decided at the Supreme Court years hence. If Bill 124 stands, the Ontario government stands to save almost \$10 billion in salaries and wages from 2019 through to 2025-2027 from both unionized and non-unionized employees.

The battle against the Ford government's brutal attacks on workers' living standards is not over. But to prosecute a successful counter-offensive, workers need to build their own rank-and-file committees independent of the official union bureaucracies who consistently act to smother a broad working class counter-offensive against concessions contracts, social service cuts, anti-worker laws and a relentless state-big business assault on the living conditions of workers everywhere.



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