

Transit workers in Loudoun County, Virginia, authorize strike amid ongoing transit crisis

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On November 10, 140 bus operators, maintenance, paratransit and other workers in Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 689 voted by 96 percent in favor of authorizing a strike against the operator of Loudoun County Transit (LCT) in Northern Virginia.

This vote falls five days before the scheduled opening of the final phase of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's (WMATA) new Silver Line rail service extension connecting to Washington Dulles International Airport (IAD).

According to the Local 689 press release, Keolis, a transnational company operating the system on behalf of the county, had refused to acknowledge the existence of their union and did not respect the contract already set in place. In addition, Keolis slashed retirement and health insurance benefits, cut weekly hours, and forced workers to have a recertification vote of the local's bargaining unit. That vote resulted in a 95 percent vote in favor of the re-unionization of the LCT workforce.

The local also claims that Keolis has been unable to adequately hire staff ahead of the extension's opening, because it is the "lowest paying transit agency in the region."

After the strike vote, Keolis proposed a side letter agreement prohibiting the ATU from striking. Raymond Jackson, the local's president, responded by stating, "Keolis underbid this contract and thought they were going to profit off of underpaying these workers forever. They thought they could stop us with illegal threats, retaliation, and other union-busting tactics, but they were wrong."

But under Jackson, ATU 689 has used the tactic of limited, largely symbolic strikes by small groups in the region's constellation of transit agencies and private

contractors. This includes the 2019-2020 strike of 130 Transdev workers in Northern Virginia. It was followed by a one-day strike of MetroAccess call center workers in 2021. This was followed by a three-day strike of 150 D.C. Circulator contract workers in the spring of this year. Following this, 200 paratransit drivers working for Transdev struck in July.

In 2018, the ATU 689 worked to bury the strike ratification vote of thousands of its public workers, instead imposing a "cooling-off period" on them while it retreated behind closed doors to negotiate with WMATA. This resulted in a concessions-packed contract with the transit system.

The WMATA announced on October 31 that six train stations would open in Northern Virginia alongside the new Silver Line rail track extension. The new rail extension came online on November 15, concluding the second phase of a project that started construction in 2009.

In addition to the stations, the WMATA will also open a new rail yard called the Dulles Rail Yard near the Washington Dulles International Airport, which is expected to be the largest in the transit system, employing 450 people.

Preparing for the opening and holiday season, Metro has been pushing for the total return of their defective 7000-series railcar fleet to service, in hopes of relieving the crowded railcars and improving service times. A defect in the cars' axles resulted in three derailments in 2021, leading to their removal from service. The agency has made several failed efforts to return the railcars to service, each time without identifying a way to resolve the defect.

By pushing for the complete return of the railcars in

time for the holidays, Metro is avoiding responsibility for resolving the defect. In effect, it is using the rail extension project to slur over its still unaddressed safety problems.

Local news outlets reported on November 1 that the WMSC had approved Metro's revised safety plan to address the mitigation of the defect in the press tonnage of railcars and would allow the return of the 7000-series railcars into operation.

In the plan, Metro will simply designate which press tonnage 7000-series railcars operate on what lines to reduce the likelihood of their wheels spreading and conduct a recurring wheel inspection every four days, which will then slow down to every week for about two months to catch anomalies. But the root of the wheel defect will remain unresolved.

The railcars' wheel defect had been known to transit inspection teams since 2017 and was exposed by the original investigation into the derailments by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). But this fact has been recently challenged.

In a tweet published in September, Washington Metrorail Safety Commission Chief Executive Officer David Mayer alleged that WMATA knew about these defects much further back. Mayer revealed that the federal body "identified safety issues" as early as 2015 in an internal report. He went on to mention that only one-third of the 7000-series railcar fleet was corrected since then and that two-thirds are in operation using old specifications.

The crisis in the metro system is the result of the agency executives' desperate effort to resolve a projected budget shortfall. Earlier this month, the *Washington Post* editorial board stated that the metro board is looking into ways to resolve a projected \$185 million deficit.

While the transit system has received \$2.4 billion in congressional bailout money during the pandemic, "it's up to the region to plug the system's daunting operating budget deficits." If it fails to, the *Post*'s editors declare, a "budgetary chasm that spells painful service cuts next year, and draconian ones thereafter" is in store.

The most important thing, in the *Post*'s view, is "getting more workers back to the office and revitalizing not only the downtown core but also once-vibrant suburban commercial hubs." Along these lines,

General Manager Randy Clarke said, "We're very focused on opening the line for Thanksgiving holiday travel ... we know how important that is."

In addition to facing an ongoing pandemic and other safety issues, the Metro riding public and its workforce confront the Washington-region business establishment's effort place the total costs of the pandemic on their backs, threatening a social conflict.



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