

San Diego bus drivers on strike against poor working conditions, unpaid breaks, lack of bathrooms and low wages

Linda Rios
30 May 2023

Approximately 400 MTS bus drivers in South Bay and East County San Diego went on an unfair labor practices (UPL) strike May 16 to demand higher wages and better working conditions from employer Transdev. Six days later drivers from First Transit also walked out on strike. Transdev and First Transport, which are contracted through the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS), are responsible for operating numerous bus routes and paratransit services throughout the city.

Transdev, a multinational transportation company based in France, recently acquired First Transport and employs around 35,000 workers throughout the US and Canada. Paratransit drivers are represented by Teamsters Local 542, while the drivers of the full-sized city buses are represented by Local 683.

Workers are demanding not only a wage that keeps up with the incredibly high cost of living and inflation in the state but improved work conditions. Workers are forced to take unpaid breaks during the day in areas with no access to restrooms or other secure facilities where they can rest. The starting wage for drivers is \$20.58, which tops out at \$27 after three years. This is a grossly insufficient in one of the most expensive regions in the country.

Drivers told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters that routes begin at 3:30 a.m., but the company has designated rest and bathroom stops, such as Corner Bakery which does not open until 6:00 a.m. There are too few porta potties that are often not serviced or broken into by the city's growing homeless population, making drivers feel unsafe.

Another central issue for workers is doing away with the split shift schedules. This means a worker will have two shifts over a 12- or 13-hour day with five hours of unpaid downtime. Drivers also report that the company is getting two workers to do the routes of three people. "There are runs that have 12 hours without the split, you're working 12-13 hours. Anything over eight is overtime; so you put in four hours overtime. This means that two drivers are covering an eight-hour shift. Then your week is not a 40-hour week. It's a 56-, 57-, 58-hour work week or more."

Workers are also being worked six days in a row in a process known as Inverse. One driver said, "Inverse means if you have Saturday and Sunday off, they are forcing you to work on your sixth day. It's part of the contract that we have where they can inverse you. They start from lowest to top and fulfill spaces as needed, but the roster is not complete since we only have 220 drivers. So they keep rotating that list, and it means you get hit every single weekend. People are tired and exhausted. What happens if you don't want to come in? They give you a miss-out or an absence, and you only get six of those."

On conditions throughout the pandemic, a group of drivers told reporters, "Throughout the pandemic we didn't stop. They said they would give us reduced hours but didn't. We lost a few drivers. No air filtration was put in the buses. They sealed the front section of the bus. They finally put a protective steel plexi glass between us [and the passengers]. We never got hazard pay; all we got was the COVID hour. We just kept going throughout the pandemic."

The strike has vast support and is growing. "At the beginning it started with Paratransit in El Centro, then we honored their line and on that day 260 drivers didn't go to work. We wanted to send the company a message," a driver told reporters. "Even the mechanics are honoring the strike. Right now there are 120 buses broken down, and they can't be fixed because the mechanics are honoring our line. The only people coming out are 90-day probation drivers. Trolley workers have already stated if we stand downtown they will stop the trolleys."

Dozens of routes have been limited to no service with Transdev South Bay and Transdev East County, which are operating at approximately 10 percent and 70 percent capacity, respectively.

While the drivers have mass support from other workers and the broader community, local news outlets have sought to hold striking workers responsible for the lack of services available to riders, especially for people with disabilities. Paratransit services are an incredibly important source of transportation for the hundreds of people who rely on them daily to attend doctor appointments, go to work or school, and to complete a number of important tasks pertaining to their health and well-being.

One rider who uses paratransit services, interviewed by NBC San Diego 7, explained how the strike affected her ability to make it to San Diego State University for an exam. Nevertheless, she gave her unwavering support to the drivers stating, “We are behind you, and we want you to know that we are rooting for you.”

Other outlets have spoken to riders waiting for extended periods of time at bus stops who either make it on to overcrowded buses or eventually give up waiting and walk or call family members for a ride.

This is not an innocent maneuver. The pro-corporate media outlets are attempting to shift blame for the strike onto workers and to sway public opinion against them, just as they have done to striking nurses and health care professionals, teachers and other workers in the past, in order to pressure workers into accepting a new contract and return to work as quickly as possible.

Jose Puga, vice president for the Teamsters Local 683, speaking with the *San Diego Union Tribune* said, “It’s pretty much for profit. Instead of scheduling properly, they just stop paying them and say, ‘There’s no work for you, so just linger around here for three to four hours, and then complete the rest of your shift in the evening.’”

What Puga and the rest of the union bureaucracy do not mention is that the Teamsters have agreed to continued concessions. One driver told reporters, “10-15 years ago the splits started. They started by giving 5 percent paddles split shifts, now we have about 460 paddles, and the company is allowed to make 25 percent of them split.” Paltry wages, split shifts, the inverse weekend shifts that result in working six-day weeks have all been allowed in the contracts.

As of Monday one driver noted that First Transit “offered us \$30, which would be a \$1 increase per year. If you compare it to the cost of living, it’s not very much. This is why a lot of drivers are leaving. In two months 200 drivers left.” Workers want a living wage, closer to \$35 an hour, which is what one driver said San Diego Transit makes. “Drivers are leaving, and they go to other places. A driver can leave from here and work at Otay dump trucks and make \$38 an hour to start.”

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) union bureaucracy cannot be entrusted with carrying forward the struggle. It should be recalled how the union assisted management by imposing the 2018 UPS contract that the majority of the 340,000 workers voted down, by citing a constitutional loophole.

This was not an isolated case. The Teamsters has a long history of subordinating workers’ demands to the profit requirements of the corporations. The Teamsters for a Democratic Union, a faction of the IBT, is no different. Both organizations have ties not only to organized crime but to both Democratic and Republican parties, both of which have overseen decades of attacks on the living standards of worker.

The late Teamster President Frank Fitzsimmons was praised

by former President Ronald Reagan for garnering the respect of business and political leaders as he fondly reflected on their “friendship.” The Reagan administration was notorious for deregulation, implementing deep cuts to funding for social programs and ruthlessly crushing the strike of 13,000 PATCO workers in 1981.

Similar tactics may be employed by the Biden administration with the contract for 340,000 UPS workers, which is set to expire at the end of July. These workers are also represented by the IBT.

Sean Orr, a DSA member and co-chair of the national steering committee of the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, claimed that the Biden administration would not impose an injunction on workers, as it did last year to railroaders, because the Railway Labor Act does not apply to UPS employees.

Last November, Biden pushed through a despised contract by Congressional fiat with wide bipartisan support, including that of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Of the three largest rail unions, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) and the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED) are part of the Teamsters union.

The Teamsters, as well as the TDU and the DSA, have hailed new Teamsters President Sean O’Brien as a “reform” candidate, with Orr gloating, “Two years ago we changed the direction of our union. We flipped things at the top.” However, it has since been revealed that O’Brien made numerous trips to the White House in the lead up to and in the aftermath of the struggle by railroad workers.

No doubt the administration of the most “pro-labor” president worked closely in conjunction with the “reformist” O’Brien to enforce the Railway Labor Act. MTS workers must take this warning as a sign of things to come.

MTS drivers must not be caught unawares, as the union will seek to limit and shut down the strike, which is the purpose of a calling an unfair labor strike rather than a strike over contract issues. Workers are told the strike must be contained to the issues of bathroom breaks and split shifts but not pay.

Workers must form their own organizations: rank-and-file committees to return power to the workers. These committees must expand the struggle by linking transit drivers with other workers across industries, to fight for significant improvements in pay and working conditions. For more information fill out the form below.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact