

Union keeps Northern Virginia transit workers on the job after contract expires

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13 December 2023

Do you work for the Fairfax Connector or another public transit system in the DC area? The WSWWS wants to hear from you. Tell us about your conditions by filling out the form below. All submissions will remain anonymous.

At least 546 transit workers at the Northern Virginia-based operation Fairfax Connector remain on the job almost two weeks after their contract expired on November 30. Workers at the Connector, which runs 93 bus routes in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C. and serves nearly 26,000 passengers a day, are demanding higher pay, more vacation time, increased sick pay and retirement security.

In 2019, the Fairfax Connector was taken over by the private firm Transdev. According to *Sustainable Bus*, the France-based multinational raked in €7.7 billion in 2022, with 65 percent of its revenues outside of France. This profitability exceeds what it made in 2019, the final year before the pandemic started.

According to the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689, the workers are among the lowest paid transit workers in Northern Virginia, one of the most expensive areas of the country. Snagajob.com recently listed a job posting for Transdev bus drivers with an advertised salary of \$22.64 per hour. This is less than half of the median salary in Fairfax County, which borders Washington, D.C.

Talks between the transit service and the union have nearly broken down, with the latter saying the transit negotiators “continuously dragged their feet” when asked for a meeting to discuss the contract. Fairfax Connector has provided “low-ball offers” which are “a slap in the face” to the workers, the ATU has written.

In 2019, Fairfax Connector drivers went on a four day strike. The walkout coincided with a three month strike of another group of Northern Virginia transit

workers also employed by Transdev. The twin strikes demonstrated the immense potential for a regional movement among transit workers, with the potential to halt the Mid-Atlantic region in the weeks leading up to the Christmas holiday.

However, no sooner had the Fairfax Connector strike begun, than it was abruptly called off without any of the workers’ demands being met. It is now clear that the ATU made this decision because it feared encouraging a broader walkout among transit workers. The result was forcing Fairfax Connector workers to accept a sellout contract which left them among the lowest paid in the region.

Reprising its previous strikebreaking role from 2019, the ATU has now refused to even threaten a strike.

“The union could call for a strike authorization vote at any time, but [ATU spokesperson Ben] Lynn says nothing has been scheduled so far,” wrote local publication *Reston Now* before the contract’s expiration last month. The publication further notes that “Transdev says it doesn’t anticipate any service disruptions as a result of the agreement expiring.”

ATU 689 has put out further communications since the contract’s expiration, stressing “there is no work stoppage” planned despite the previous contract’s lapse.

This is despite transit workers being in a strong position to take up the fight with Transdev. The company’s profits, accumulated through the exploitation of its workforce, are extraordinarily vulnerable to a movement from below.

The contract expiration comes amid a serious financial crisis for transit in the Washington, D.C. region. On Tuesday, Washington Metropolitan Area Transportation Authority (WMATA) general manager Randy Clarke spoke publicly about the \$750 million

deficit in WMATA which comes due next summer.

According to Clarke, the only way to avert this is a “sustainable and predictable funding source to replace federal relief funding” which sustained the beleaguered system over the past few years. Reporting on Clarke’s budget, NBC wrote that his “balanced but significantly reduced” proposal represented a transit “doomsday scenario,” with massive cuts to services, times of service, personnel and even entire metro stops closed permanently.

It is under these conditions that ATU 689, which represents nearly 10,000 transit workers in the capital region, has decided to collude with Transdev to avoid a work stoppage at Fairfax Connector.

This was made clear by the union’s response to the 2024 Metro budget proposal on Tuesday. The union declared that it was “shocked and dismayed by the stunning and draconian proposed cuts to WMATA service.”

Rather than prepare its members to mobilize in defense of the right to transportation for the area’s workers, the union called upon various elected governments to “all come together to implement the desperately needed solution.” It emphasized that “the Union is not afraid of engaging in a good-faith process to solve the problem.” This will fall on deaf ears.

The ATU’s decision to throw in the towel before the fight even starts comes despite the fact that transit workers and the general public are in no way responsible for the transit system’s deficit. According to the Eno Center for Transportation, two-thirds of the deficit (\$484 million) comes from the loss of ridership, a product of the capitalist response to the raging pandemic and refusal to take safety seriously, and also WMATA’s allowing the various jurisdictions it serves to forego annual payments during that period.

It is clear from the ATU’s response to this crisis that it also expects its membership to bear the burden of the pandemic even more than they have already.

It is necessary for Fairfax Connector workers to form their own rank-and-file organizations, answering only to their fellow workers and excluding ATU’s paid bureaucrats. The rank and file committees must prepare to mobilize not only to defend their jobs and livelihoods. In addition, they must expand their struggle throughout the region to defend the right to transportation for all working people.

A special appeal must be made to the 8,000 public WMATA transit workers, whose contract ends in June, just as the system’s deficit comes due. If the behavior of the ATU in the current situation is any hint, these workers will find themselves engaged in a war on two fronts: with the management and their bought-and-paid-for union representatives.



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