

Northern Virginia transit workers' strike enters second week after union and company negotiations fail

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Workers at the Fairfax Connector transit system in Northern Virginia entered their second week on strike yesterday after negotiations between the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 689 and the company, Transdev, failed to come to an agreement Monday.

As of last Wednesday, 638 bus drivers, mechanics, utility, facility workers and clerks have been on strike, the largest in the Washington D.C. transit system since 2019. Their job action has led to service disruptions on over 90 different bus routes in the busy Washington D.C. suburbs.

Workers are demanding adequate retirement payments, with ATU Local 689 stating, “[T]he current 401(K) contribution model has resulted in more than half of the workers having zero to little retirement savings.”

A graph released by the ATU local compares retirement and sick leave benefits at Fairfax Connector to those at nearby transit services. For the Alexandria DASH bus service also in Northern Virginia, for instance, the “Company Contributes 8% of Employee pay. No Employee match required.” However, for Fairfax Connector, “Company only contributes if employees’ defer wages proposal (1/29/24) to put into a 401k.” It notes that the company’s contribution falls by half if an employee contributes over four percent into their retirement package.

A striking worker informed the *World Socialist Web Site* that he doubted Fairfax Connector workers would ever receive an adequate pension from the transit service, due to the revolving door of private contractors who are awarded deals by the county and nearby jurisdictions. “Unless [Fairfax County] says in its contract that our retirement is part of the contract,”

workers will lose whatever benefits that accrue to them if a contract is not renewed.

As for pay, a worker told the WSWS they are forced to relocate outside of Fairfax County due to the extraordinary cost of living. Previous workers have told the WSWS that the starting pay for a Fairfax Connector driver is “roughly \$60,000 yearly,” or half of the median income level in the county.

For its part, Transdev in a press release claimed it had offered a “comprehensive proposal that includes significant wage increases, healthcare benefits, retirement savings, bonuses, guaranteed minimum hours, and additional perks tailored to employees of all experience levels.”

Workers raised other concerns, such as the lack of adequate sick leave. “We are the only company that worked the whole pandemic,” said a veteran transit worker at the Cinder Bed Road picket location.

“Every other [transit service in the region] stopped. The first weeks they didn’t have anything to give to us. No masks, no gloves. We didn’t stop one single day.” A worker at another picket told the WSWS that those who called out during the first few months of the pandemic were penalized.

The ATU has called an unfair labor practices (ULP) strike, a narrowly defined category of work stoppage that allows it to call the strike off the second it determines the company is “bargaining in good faith,” regardless of whether or not the workers’ demands are met. This is the same tactic the ATU used in 2019 when the Connector workers went on strike for four days before being called back to work.

Despite their job action at that time coinciding with a parallel strike of over 120 Washington Metropolitan

Area Transit Authority (WMATA) contractors also employed by Transdev, workers were sold out in the end without adequate retirement benefits and other demands being met.

“This company is not prepared to spend resources. They hoard everything,” said a former Transdev worker, who joined the picket in solidarity.

“We struck for a week shy of three months [in 2019] because they wanted to keep us at \$20 an hour through the whole three years of our contract,” said another worker previously employed by the private contractor.

The former Transdev worker noted that WMATA had ended its contract with the company due to the 2019-2020 strike. However, once the contract ended and they once again became public sector employees, more difficulties followed. “We displaced [less senior] public employees” when the private contract was voided. “That didn’t make metro employees very happy.”

The contract battle is occurring as the public transit system WMATA has incurred a massive debt of over \$750 million over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic due to depressed ridership levels and other safety problems. Starting July, the transit service is proposing possible cuts to Metrobus service routes, fare hikes exceeding 25 percent in some cases, and even closures of whole stations throughout the Washington D.C. area.

As is invariably the case, local officials are proposing that workers and the riding public must bear the costs for the authorities’ lack of concern for safety.

The ATU has confined its appeals to local representatives of the Democratic Party, seeking to channel workers’ anger into dead end appeals to this capitalist party, which is squandering hundreds of billions on war. The union writes in its most recent press release “Fairfax County officials have continued to remain silent and have refused to stand with workers and demand that their contractor bargain in good faith.”

In fact, the Democrats, just as much as the Republicans, are committed to spending every last dime on wars and inflating the wealth of billionaires. This is the reason they have “refused to stand with workers.” By promoting Democratic Party officials as supposedly sympathetic to working class people, the transit union is seeking to mislead its members and the public into believing this capitalist party will hear their

demands.

For his part, Democratic Fairfax County Supervisor Jeff McKay has a vested interest in keeping its contractors’ payment low. In comments to Fairfax Now, the county official demanded, “Connector service needs to be sustainable not just now but in the future.” The county is projecting a \$284 million budget shortfall in the coming fiscal year, primarily due to “The real estate market, global impacts on the local economy and pending collective bargaining agreements.”

From these comments, it is clear that Fairfax Connector workers are involved in a fight against not only their current employer, but the county and federal governments, which will not tolerate a growing struggle of workers on the doorstep of the national capital.

In order to advance their interests, Connector workers must form their own independent worker-based rank-and-file organizations so they may formulate their own demands and decide on the best way to take their fight forward. Their strike is part of a growing workers’ struggle taking place internationally against the interests of big business.

As such, their strike must form links with other workers’ struggles, in particular, that of 9,000 WMATA employees whose contract expires in June this year, coinciding with major planned cutbacks in transit service. In doing this, they must refuse to subordinate themselves to the strategy and demands of the pro-corporate and pro-Democratic Party ATU, which is seeking to contain their struggle before it even gets started.



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