

12,000 Toronto transit workers set for first strike in 16 years as of June 7

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Twelve thousand Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) operators, collectors, station staff and customer service representatives could walk off the job as early as June 7 at North America's third-largest transit agency.

A no-board ruling was granted earlier this week by Ontario's Labour Ministry following a request by the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 113, which has been in contract talks with TTC management since early February. The no-board process, designed to block strikes, involves the government accepting that talks have stalled and imposes a 17-day cooling off period before job action can go ahead.

The strike would mark the first job action by TTC workers in 16 years. In 2011, the provincial Liberal government banned strike action at the transit agency by declaring it to be an "essential service." This brazen violation of democratic rights was facilitated by the ATU and other unions, which refused to wage a genuine struggle against it at the time, because such a fight would have involved a political confrontation with their political friends in then-Premier Dalton McGuinty's pro-austerity regime. Instead, they instructed workers to place their faith in the capitalist courts, which took 12 years to determine that workers' constitutional right to strike had been violated and overturn the law.

Underscoring the cynicism of their claim that the TTC was an "essential service," TTC management, backed by Toronto City Council and successive provincial governments, used the free hand given them while workers were muzzled by the strike ban to starve the transit agency of funding. This resulted in mounting service disruptions, dilapidated infrastructure, poor working conditions, and an increase in the use of temporary contractors to fill vacancies. A 2017 report from CodeRedTO concluded that the TTC was among the most heavily dependent of all North American transit agencies on user fees, which made up over two-thirds of its budget.

In a revealing political lineup, Premier Doug Ford's Tory government appealed the Ontario Supreme Court's November 2023 decision that struck down the law passed by its pro-union Liberal predecessors. However, the Ontario Court of Appeals upheld the Supreme Court's decision Thursday, rejecting the Ford government's anti-worker appeal.

TTC Chairperson Jamaal Myers has claimed in a written statement that a strike would be "devastating" for the city. What has truly been "devastating" for the city and riders is the decrepit state of the TTC caused by decades of budget cuts, which have

allowed infrastructure to decay beyond repair and intensified the miserable working conditions faced by public transit workers.

In 2023, the TTC announced sweeping service cuts across 39 routes, which account for about 20 percent of its operations. A report by Toronto Metropolitan University researchers revealed that the cuts hit deprived areas of the city above all, including those where residents have no other option to get around.

Communities affected included areas with low-income residents, people who are precariously employed, and new immigrants. "These neighbourhoods may not generate the highest amounts of public transit trips, but residents in these neighbourhoods may be more dependent on public transit for their everyday needs compared to other parts of the city," the report pointed out. "The proposed service changes by the TTC will likely make these neighbourhoods more mobility poor, creating additional barriers to the residents' participation in employment, education, and society in general."

The deterioration in service has gone hand in hand with a systematic undermining of working conditions. Last year, a temporary contractor employed as a customer service representative at TTC stations by TalentWorld, a third-party staffing agency, spoke out about the violation of workers' rights to breaks during shifts. The agency wrote to contractors asserting that they are entitled only to a 15-minute break for shifts lasting between five and eight hours, when in reality the Ontario Labour Code guarantees workers a 30-minute break for these shifts. The contractor also reported to CBC News that temporary workers often have to pay to gain access to TTC stations if permanent employees are not present to let them in, and use public washrooms because they have no keys to access staff bathrooms.

The TTC refused a request by CBC News to confirm how many third-party contractors it uses. However, it is clear that management's top priority is to use contracting out as a means to slash labour costs for all workers as much as possible.

When the TTC presented its 2023 budget in January 2023, the service cuts included a 9 percent across-the-board reduction in hours served compared to a year earlier. Stuart Green, the TTC communications spokesman, bluntly told CBC in August 2023, "Using contracted temporary [customer service representatives] allows us flexibility to only bring in staff as needed for short-term closures. Direct hires would be more expensive when salaries and benefits are factored in and we would not have as much flexibility to bring in more people as needed."

In June 2023, TTC management boasted that it had made savings over the previous year by cutting services “5% below budgeted” and due to “labour and benefit under-expenditures resulting from vacancies.”

It comes as no surprise in this context that workers’ main demands for the new contract are job security, real wage increases, and improved benefits.

While the TTC and the city of Toronto claim there is no money to make desperately needed repairs to infrastructure, the ruling class is showering unlimited cash on the military and providing unlimited funds to wage war abroad. The connection between cuts to public services and social programs, and funding for aggressive imperialist war in Europe, the Middle East, and the Asian Pacific is clear. Opposition to war is paramount for the defence of social programs and critical infrastructure.

The trade unions are hostile to such a fight because they are tied by a thousand threads to the federal Liberal government and its political accomplices in the New Democrats. Their goal is to confine all workers’ struggles within the straitjacket of the “collective bargaining” system and offer their services to management as a “partner” in enforcing brutal exploitation and austerity.

This was summed up in comments by ATU Local 113 President Marvin Alfred, who responded last year to the reports of the use of temporary contract employees by politely asking the company to use union members, not opposing the use of contract labour in principle. “We would like for the people that are populating transit worker positions to be local, unionized labour because I think that is the best way to deliver that service reliably to the public,” he said. In other words, so long as the ATU enjoys a source of dues, it is happy to work with management as it employs temporary contractors to undermine conditions for all workers, both full-time and temporary.

In April, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 2, which represents 650 electrical and trades workers with the TTC, blocked a pending strike before it began with a sellout tentative agreement. CUPE had forced the workers to labour without a contract for over two years since its expiration in April 2022. No details were made public about the agreement.

Alfred has remained evasive in his public comments on whether the ATU will allow a strike to go ahead. The bureaucracy is clearly looking for a formula to call off the job action, for fear that a determined struggle by TTC workers could trigger a broader movement of the working class against austerity and war.

Already this month, the Liberal government has indefinitely banned a strike by 9,300 Canadian National and Canadian Pacific Kansas City rail workers by calling on the unelected Canadian Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) to examine the “community safety” implications of a work stoppage. The CIRB possesses arbitrary powers to block workers from exercising their democratic right to strike in opposition to the immense profits of the parasitic owners of the railroads.

At the same time, the government-aligned Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) is dragging out talks with Canada Post management under conditions in which sweeping concessions are being demanded, leaving postal workers on the job without a

contract for over three months.

Underscoring the readiness of the rank-and-file for a fight, the ATU acknowledged that already 8,000 of its 12,000 workers have reported for picket duty. But this militancy can only support the necessary mobilization of broader sections of the working class in support of the TTC workers if it finds an outlet independent of and in opposition to the corporatist ATU bureaucracy.

TTC workers should establish rank-and-file strike committees to seize control of the contract struggle from the union bureaucrats and make an appeal to all sections of workers in Ontario, across Canada and internationally to join their struggle. All workers require a well-funded, reliable, and affordable transit system for their work, social, and personal lives. But this goal can only be achieved in a fight against the subordination of society’s vast resources to the accumulation of profits by a handful at the top and the waging of imperialist war around the world.

A major step in this fight involves workers freeing themselves from the political and organizational dominance of the ATU and trade union bureaucracies, which work with the Liberal government and its NDP backers to smother the class struggle while they cut public services to the bone. TTC workers can spearhead a counter-offensive by leading a fight for real wage gains, an end to the decades of cuts, which have led to terrible conditions at the TTC, and secure full-time positions with benefits and pension rights for all. This means counterposing to the ruling elite’s pursuit of austerity and war, a program to unify the working class in struggle to use society’s wealth to meet the social needs of the vast majority of the population.

All TTC workers who are interested in developing this fight should fill out the form below to get in touch with the *World Socialist Web Site* today.



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