

Washington, D.C. transit workers forced to vote on “memorandum of understanding” instead of contract

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On Tuesday, August 20, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) management and Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 689 forced the the system’s nearly 8,500 workers to vote on a memorandum of understanding (MOU) document in place of a tentative agreement.

The four-year contract resulting from this sordid maneuver will allow WMATA to abuse its workers until 2028, and likely introduce new attacks which haven’t been disclosed to the membership.

Workers immediately had doubts about the authenticity of the contract vote. “My opinion is the contract was ratified before we even voted on it,” said one worker to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The vote was done on paper ballots. We haven’t got a count yet,” he said. “Everyone could’ve voted no, how would we know?”

Other workers took to social media to relay their concern. “The union were urging others to vote ‘yes’ without providing any information about what they were actually voting for,” said one commentator. “You would never walk in a dealership and sign your name at the bottom of a blank piece of paper, with the finance person’s word that they are getting you the best rates and financing. That’s essentially what [ATU 689] are asking members to do.”

Given that members only received an abbreviated summary of the contract, the actual details of the document are yet to be revealed, therefore any number of provisions within the contract are subject to alteration at management’s convenience.

“And that’s the question we all had,” said another worker, when asked why the union and management would force workers to vote on a non-binding

agreement that is subject to changes.

What is known from the MOU is more than enough to raise concern. The deal allows WMATA management to dole out increased penalties if workers call out unexpectedly, while limiting the raises and cost-of-living adjustments employees receive.

The “contract” gives up a wage raise in the first year of the contract. This is allegedly made up for in the subsequent three years, with a total raise of at least 9.5 percent and an additional possible cost-of-living bump that “shall not exceed 5%.”

However, this is a step down from rate increases given recently, with workers taking in a 10 percent pay increase in 2023 alone, as compensation for inflation.

Likewise, the new regime imposes a low-tolerance work environment, doubling the penalties a worker receives for missing scheduled work days. The contract introduces language allowing management to cut in half (from 36 months to 18 months) the amount of time an injured worker can be placed on an alternate work detail until they have recovered.

Workers hired after the previous cut-off date of January 1, 2010 will now be given access to the retirees’ healthcare plan, “provided that post-2010 hires pay thirty-five percent (35%) of required contributions for retiree health coverage,” instead of the previous 20 percent pay-in for pre-2010 hires.

The retirees’ healthcare fund was previously sustained on 1 percent deductions taken from members’ paychecks and administered by Local 689. This system has now been eliminated, with a private insurer taking over the fund. Many workers expressed satisfaction over this change due to justifiable concerns the ATU local had a conflict of interest in

administering the members' health fund.

Adding to concerns, workers noted that ATU Local 689 president Raymond Jackson admitted during union meetings to signing a non-disclosure agreement with WMATA management during contract negotiations, the nature of which was not to be revealed to members. Jackson, for his part, called the deal a "huge win" for the membership.

According to WMATA general manager Randy Clarke, "Our employees are Metro's greatest assets... But we are facing unprecedented financial challenges, and this agreement helps with short- and long-term cost controls."

This is a reference to WMATA's ongoing funding crisis. A *Washington Post* article published earlier this month spells out the transit service's crisis, "Billions of federal pandemic-relief dollars are now nearly gone, and the 'nation's subway,' as some boosters call it, is facing massive deficits far into the future."

The publication states, "Annual operating deficits of up to a billion dollars are looming in the coming years, Metro officials said, which will require dire cuts or new funds." Alarming, it notes, "Metro will also hit a critical debt ceiling in 2028, exhausting a dedicated funding stream it has used to borrow billions for infrastructure repairs and posing safety risks in the long run."

It is clear that the WMATA agreement is a down payment, with workers and the public made to bear the entire cost of the looming fiscal cliff.

In this situation, it would be the greatest mistake to look toward the ATU or any official trade union apparatus to defend workers' well being. In contrast, the 8,500-worker-strong transit system is a powerful reminder of the working class's power in the nation's capital. The various local and national officials which oversee the system will not hesitate to make an example of the public transit employees.

To meet this threat, workers require their own rank-and-file organizations, composed of and led by themselves, free of the ATU and management, in order to prepare for the coming period of struggles.



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