

Milwaukee transit workers vote to authorize strike

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On July 9, workers at the Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) voted by 98 percent to 2 percent to authorize a strike. The bus drivers and mechanics, who are members of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 998, are fighting for better hours and working conditions.

The strike vote is another indication of the growing anger and militancy among workers across the United States and the world.

The news comes on the heels of a surprise announcement that MCTS is projecting a \$10.9 million budget deficit in the current fiscal year. Following the announcement, two county transit officials resigned: Donna Brown-Martin, the executive director of the Milwaukee County Department of Transportation; and Julie Esch, the interim President and CEO of MCTS since January.

The sudden announcement of a deficit—as recently as June 8, an MCTS report projected a “balanced budget”—also appears to have violated county law. Officials are required to report to the comptroller and other county leaders when they become aware of a net deficit of \$100,000 or larger, or an overtime deficit of \$1 million or more. The county Comptroller Liz Sumner learned of the deficit instead through media reports.

In response to the media reports, Sumner ordered an audit of the governance and oversight of MCTS, and the County Board’s Committee on Transportation and Transit held a hearing on the deficit. Notably, Esch submitted her resignation to MCTS on the eve of the committee hearing.

These developments are occurring as transit workers and the riding public are under assault nationally. Los Angeles, Chicago and Philadelphia are preparing to drastically cut transit services as part of “doomsday”

budget scenarios, including attacks on workers’ pay, hours and working conditions, as well as drastically reduced service hours for riders, who are overwhelmingly working class.

MCTS has already announced reduced service on several bus routes, a total planned decrease of 20,000 hours of service time this Fall, as a cost-cutting measure. It also stated its intent to engage in talks with the union to “manage labor costs.” It reported that \$4.7 million of the overage was in the category of wages and fringe benefits.

The current contract extension under which workers are operating expires at the end of July. That extension is already the second one that union bureaucrats have agreed to since May. These extensions gave MCTS executives time to spring the deficit on the union as leverage in negotiations. MCTS negotiators handed union bureaucrats a press release announcing the deficit during the middle of a negotiating session.

The Democratic leadership of Milwaukee County was not content to pin the blame for the MCTS deficit on MCTS workers alone. The County Board hearing on the deficit had a second agenda item: so-called “fare evasion.” MCTS blames another \$4 million in revenue shortfall on riders themselves, claiming that approximately 1 in 4 riders in 2024 did not pay the fare.

MCTS drivers do not enforce fare payment when riders board the bus. However, the union bureaucracy, only too eager to collaborate on creating and deepening working class divisions, insists that MCTS hire security officers and place them on routes with the highest “fare evasion.”

The route alleged to have the highest “fare evasion” is a route connecting downtown Milwaukee with the major academic medical campus in the city of

Wawautosa to the west, which is home to the Medical College of Wisconsin and its associated academic healthcare systems, Froedtert Health and Children's Wisconsin. These health systems are also the safety-net providers in the region. Thus, the poorest and sickest citizens of Milwaukee will be made to pay for MCTS deficits, whereas the wealthiest will be exempted.

The ruling class attack on public transportation and the divisions it foments among workers and riders must be opposed. The Democratic Party and union bureaucracies are no route to saving the system. Rather they are actively engaged in the very austerity measures and sellout contracts that continue to disintegrate it.

It is necessary to soberly study the recent sabotage of strikes by union officials and draw the necessary lessons. As of this writing, 9,000 municipal workers are being forced to vote on a contract after having been betrayed by AFSCME District Council 33, which colluded with the city of Philadelphia to ram through a tentative agreement and end the historic strike.

Similarly, in New Jersey, bureaucrats of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLET) collaborated with NJ Transit, federal mediators and bureaucrats from the ATU to isolate and smother a potential strike of railroad engineers in the state.

However, despite these betrayals by union officials, this does not mean these struggles are in any way over, regardless of whatever short-term losses.

The emergence of the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee, which is fighting to independently organize workers and take control of the struggle, was met with broad support from workers. This committee represents workers consciously taking up a political and organizational fight against the unions, who are tied and bound up with big business and the state, and both capitalist parties—the Republicans and Democrats.

Milwaukee transit workers must counter this ongoing and deliberate sabotage by the union bureaucracy and Democrats. They must join forces to form rank-and-file committees that democratically decide plans of action to wrest control of public transportation from the ruling class and operate it as a public utility free for all riders.

This program cannot be realized as long as social decision-making is dominated by the profit motive. Thus, these committees organize a broader working class movement, linking across transit, education,

nursing, manufacturing and so on to operate on an independent working-class political program to replace capitalism with a system that prioritizes human need over private profit.



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