

Mechanics' strike shuts down mass transit in Los Angeles

By Andrea Peters
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Bus and subway mechanics in Los Angeles County went on strike at 12:01 a.m. Tuesday, shutting down the mass transit system that serves a region with 9.6 million residents. The 2,500 Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) workers are opposing the efforts of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to restructure the union's health insurance fund, impose a two-year wage freeze and drastically reduce health benefits for retirees. An additional 9,000 workers represented by other MTA unions are honoring the ATU picket lines.

In walking off the job, the mechanics joined 70,000 grocery store workers who are involved in a strike/lockout at the major supermarket chains in Los Angeles and the whole of southern California. The supermarket chains have launched a full-scale strikebreaking operation to keep their stores open. They are demanding sweeping cuts in compensation, benefits and pensions; more "flexibility" in work assignments and hours of employment; and a permanent two-tier structure with substandard pay and benefits for new-hires. The supermarket employees, many of whom are forced to work on a part-time basis, are among the lowest paid unionized workers in California and the US as a whole.

These labor struggles, which are the largest in recent California history, reveal the enormous social and class tensions that underlay the California budget crisis and October 7 recall election. That special election resulted in the ouster of Democratic Governor Gray Davis and election of the Republican candidate, film actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, as governor-elect.

Neither Davis nor Schwarzenegger, who will assume office after the election results have been officially certified in mid-November, have made any criticism of the union-busting methods of the supermarket chains.

Both big business parties, which postured in the recall campaign as partisans of ordinary Californians and opponents of "special interests," have maintained a deafening silence on the drive by the supermarket giants and the MTA to slash workers' jobs and benefits.

The rising cost of health care is at the center of the conflict between the transit workers and the MTA. Currently, the transit union oversees a \$1.4 million monthly fund that provides health benefits to its members. The fund has become insolvent because insurance premiums have risen over the past year to \$1.9 million. The MTA is demanding that the mechanics cover the increased costs by raising their out-of-pocket contribution to the health fund from the current level of \$6 a month to approximately \$70.

The MTA is further insisting that it be given control of the health fund, claiming that mismanagement by the ATU is responsible for the current crisis. The MTA also wants to slash health care benefits for retirees over the age of 65 to \$142 a month from the current level of \$500.

The MTA proposal includes a two-year wage freeze, followed by a 1.5 percent wage increase in the third and fourth years of the contract. In an effort to turn public opinion against the striking mechanics, the MTA took out a half-page ad in the *Los Angeles Times* on Tuesday, claiming that the average annual pay for a mechanic is \$50,000 and suggesting the workers are overpaid and greedy.

As workers in Los Angeles are well aware, it is virtually impossible for a family to sustain a decent standard of living and pay the bills on \$50,000 a year. Basic living expenses in the area are already high and are continuing to rise steeply, fueled in large part by skyrocketing housing costs.

Indicative of the cowardly posture of the union officials, the ATU leadership declared it was willing to accede to some of the MTA's demands, but called the cuts sought by the city authority too extreme. "As a final effort to reach an agreement, ATU made substantial concessions on health and welfare, but we cannot abandon health care for our members and retirees," wrote ATU Local 1277 President Neil Silver in a contract negotiation update sent to union employees on October 13.

The MTA strike has shut down the entire public transit system in Los Angeles County, with the exception of 22 bus routes operated by private contractors and some local transit operations independent of the MTA.

Approximately 500,000 people ride the county's 85 bus, subway and light-rail routes every day. The vast majority of Los Angeles residents commute to work and school by way of the city's chronically congested freeways.

Because of the geographically limited character of the mass transit system and its heavy reliance on slow-moving buses, the MTA largely serves Los Angeles's working poor and immigrants—those who cannot afford cars. According to a recent study by the MTA, the average income of a bus rider is \$12,000 a year and that of a subway patron is \$22,000 a year.

Reprising the pro-management role it played during a bus drivers' strike in 2000, the mass media has adopted a pose of sympathy for low-income commuters in an attempt to split the working class and foist the blame for the disruption in service onto the striking workers.

Neither the ATU, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which represents the supermarket workers, nor the AFL-CIO union federation has made any serious attempt to mobilize the working class public in Los Angeles to stop the strikebreaking by the supermarket chains and forge an alliance between the grocery workers and transit mechanics.

In the course of the budget crisis of the past year, the unions refused to carry out any industrial action to fight job cuts and sweeping reductions in health care and other social services, in order to shield their Democratic ally in the state house, Gray Davis, who imposed the attacks on California's working families. In the recall election, the union leadership spent some \$5 million in a failed attempt to oppose the recall and

simultaneously support the main Democratic replacement candidate, Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante.

The silence of these two figures and the entire Democratic Party leadership in California on the transit and supermarket strikes underscores the bankruptcy of the AFL-CIO's support for the Democratic Party and the fiction that this big business party represents an alternative for workers to the Republicans.

The eruption of these strikes portends explosive struggles in the coming months as the new administration in Sacramento seeks to impose the weight of the ongoing budget crisis even more brutally on the backs of the working class. It is crucial that workers draw the lessons of the recall election—above all, the need to break with the two parties of big business and build an independent political movement of the working class.

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