

Washington, D.C. metro union seeks to bury members' strike vote

By Nick Barrickman
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After an overwhelming vote by its members to strike in July, the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689, with a membership of over 8,000 Washington, D.C. public transit workers, has sought to drag out discussions between it and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA).

On July 15, ninety-four percent of ATU Local 689 rank-and-file members voted to take strike action against the transit authority after the latter engaged in a series of provocations, including the summary firing of union workers and outsourcing positions to non-union contractors.

Since the overwhelming “Yes” vote, the ATU has been in a crisis. The union immediately announced a “cooling off period” and regular closed-door meetings with WMATA officials. On Monday, after the fourth such ATU-WMATA meeting, the union announced that Metro officials had agreed to reverse its policy of filling custodial positions with non-unionized contractors, which had provoked mass opposition from workers earlier this month. At the same time, WMATA reserved the right to outsource such positions in the future.

The minor concession was treated as an unalloyed victory by the union, with Local 689 spokesperson David Stephen declaring to the *Washington Post* that the transit authority “has recognized its contractual violations.” Seeking to project a veneer of toughness, the union spokesman also said the “‘strike threat’ is unchanged until all the local’s issues... are negotiated,” which would be addressed after more closed-door meetings, the next being Friday, August 3.

There is no reason to believe the union’s hollow rhetoric. WMATA’s temporary concession on custodial work can be just as easily reversed, as transit officials have previously declared. Workers in the

ATU, Metro’s largest union, have been without a contract since 2016, when discussions broke down over pay cuts, job protections and privatization of services. Since then, WMATA has behaved with impunity toward its workers, enacting policies, such as privatization, which had been rejected in negotiations.

The ATU, which is barred by contract from striking, has alleged that WMATA’s continued intransigence and flouting of contract protocols has freed it from the no-strike clause. However, ATU officials have signaled their own willingness to abandon workers’ wages and benefits in return for symbolic concessions on Metro’s part.

ATU Local 689 president Jackie Jeter explained to host Marc Fisher in a radio interview last week that during the dispute “WMATA has tried... to change the narrative of the conversation and make it about our pension or about our wages and that’s not what this is. This has nothing to do with a dollar, this has something to do with how you treat workers.”

In other words, the ATU will do nothing to defend its members’ living standards, just their “dignity.” This empty moralism will do nothing for the workers who have been summarily fired by transit officials or those who will lose out in the eventual concessions deal which the ATU is negotiating with Metro.

WMATA has faced an ongoing infrastructure and budget crisis, as breakdowns, faulty wiring and derailments have caused the transit system, the second largest in the United States, to lose a significant amount of ridership, leading to further budget problems. Earlier this year, WMATA struck a bargain with the governments of Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia, to receive a yearly subsidy of \$500 million in exchange for placing a cap of 3 percent on its operating budget—forcing WMATA employees to face constant

threat of wage and benefit cuts in exchange for funds.

Exposing the hypocrisy of WMATA officials' claims to be primarily concerned with promoting a "culture of safety" among the workforce, which workers' supposedly excessive job protections hinder, several videos circulated this week by the union show non-union contractors using cell phones while operating dangerous equipment—a direct violation of WMATA safety protocols.

Also on Monday, WMATA and the AFL-CIO's Office of Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) Local 2, representing 1,000 office employees, agreed to a contract which would allow the transit system to shed over \$2.3 million in healthcare costs in exchange for paltry wage increases. "As with any constructive negotiation, we didn't get everything we hoped for and neither did Local 2; however, this agreement fairly compensates employees while reducing Metro's costs," WMATA General Manager Paul Wiedefeld stated of the contract.

Demonstrating the ATU's hostility to its members' interests, the union has employed spokespeople to denounce the *World Socialist Web Site*. Responding to a previous WSWS article, ("Washington, D.C. transit union conspires with Metro officials while keeping members in the dark"), Jackie Jeter, president of Local 689, took to social media to declare: "Hopefully someone will read this article and not just the header! Straight up propaganda and union busting," while failing to refute a single point raised in the article.

In a reply to a comment asking if the ATU was ignoring the strike vote delivered by its members in mid-July and keeping them in the dark about the content of the negotiations, an ATU spokesperson cynically replied, "Striking is a means to an end, not an end in itself," adding: "The leadership is doing the will of the workforce."

As if the "will of the workforce" was to have their votes ignored while being excluded from negotiations taking place behind closed doors, even as Metro officials openly flout meetings, citing "scheduling conflicts" and other phony pretexts for stringing workers along. As for the claims that the strike vote was "not an end in itself," it is clear that ATU leaders are desperate to walk back the implications of a strike of transit workers in the nation's capital, particularly as workers at United Parcel Service (UPS) package

delivery and the US Postal Service are engaged in struggles against sell-out contracts being imposed on them by both their management and their unions.

rank-and-file members have reacted with increasing alarm and anger to the ATU's behavior. "This is not acceptable in my opinion the whole uproar about striking just so WMATA can stall out and our Union look weak the whole country was/is watching us and we still are not showing our strength" stated one typical comment on the ATU's social media account. "[We are] being taken for a walk", "he [General Manager of WMATA Paul J. Wiedefeld] is taking us for granted," stated another worker.

If WMATA employees are to mount a successful struggle against the dictates of management, they will find no ally in the ATU, OPEIU or any other official "labor representative." Workers must form rank-and-file committees, independent politically and organizationally from the bureaucratic trade unions, which function as arms of management.

Metro workers must take their struggle directly into the working class, linking up with UPS and public sector workers to fight for the rehiring of all employees summarily fired by management, the full funding of wages and pensions and workers' control of safety. Such a struggle must be politically independent from the Democrats and Republicans, both parties of big business intimately involved in the efforts to defund public transit and drive down workers' living standards.

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