

Arbitration panel cuts real wages and healthcare benefits for Washington D.C. Metro workers

By Nick Barrickman
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On Wednesday, an arbitration panel awarded 8,000 employees of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) nearly \$82 million in wages to be paid in part retroactively for the period dating from 2016 until 2020. While described as a raise for the workers represented by the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 689, the sum is equivalent to yearly wage increases of about 1.6 percent, or little more than *half* the annual rate of inflation. In other words, it is a cut in real wages.

The panel's ruling comes nearly a month after the 8,000 workers voted by an overwhelming 94 percent to ratify strike action against the transit authority. The ATU responded to this nearly unanimous expression of class anger at management's ongoing abuses of the workforce and efforts to privatize Metro services by immediately calling for a "cooling down period," forcing workers to remain on the job while it engaged in endless closed-door maneuvering with WMATA officials.

In addition to the "raises," the ruling also ordered workers take a cut of \$21 million in healthcare benefits. Metro workers must now contribute 20 percent to their healthcare coverage, up from 17 percent previously, as well as pay more for deductibles and copays. The panel declined to rule on the contentious issue of pensions, which has been a sticking point in contract negotiations. WMATA has proposed transferring all new hires from a defined benefit retirement plan to a 401k plan, placing workers' retirement savings at the mercy of the stock market.

Demonstrating the determination of the American ruling class and political establishment to drive down the living standards of public workers, WMATA

released an official statement, declaring that the authority had "dissented from yesterday's award because it fails to address pensions for future employees ... worsening the Authority's operating structural deficit." At the same time, it praised the healthcare givebacks, noting that the concessions "will help the Authority with cost containment."

Predictably, ATU Local 689 embraced the austerity ruling, declaring in a blog entry: "We believe the independent arbitration panel came to a rational decision, under the current circumstances, for the interest arbitration on this 4-year contract ... We are willing to accept the terms of this final and binding arbitration award for what we believe is in the best interest of the system."

The WMATA has faced an ongoing budget crisis, stemming from years of failure to maintain track and equipment, as well as an inability to obtain a dedicated funding source from the three jurisdictions it serves, Washington, D.C., and suburbs in Virginia and Maryland. A recent deal WMATA struck with the three regions carries an obligation that the transit system reduce its operations budget deficit to below three percent, placing its workers under a constant threat of wage and benefit cuts.

According to a 2017 survey by the private consulting firm WSP USA, Washington, D.C. Metro workers make slightly less on average than employees at comparable public transit systems throughout the United States.

Once again exposing the lie that WMATA officials are primarily concerned with safety aboard the transit system, an internal report issued last week reviewing the authority's contracting procedures revealed mass

breaches of safety protocol, in which “no training plan is in place to ensure all Metrobus operators and ... personnel are trained on newly acquired buses” and “as updated systems are introduced or major changes occur, there is ... no plan in place to familiarize technicians prior to those updates being integrated into the fleet.” In April, inspectors discovered over 150 manufacturing flaws on a single bus which was scheduled to join the fleet.

While the union continues to make hollow threats about acting on its members’ strike vote taken last month, a response from Metro board member Michael Goldman called the ATU’s bluff. Speaking to the *Washington Post*, Goldman stated: “I don’t think we’ll go to nuclear war [with the ATU] ... But I think there will be a level of tension that will persist between management and the union going forward.” In other words, management will continue to force the burden of Metro’s financial crisis onto the back of its workers while the union feigns opposition.

Such has been the pattern throughout the recent period. Late last month, in the wake of the 94 percent vote to strike, ATU spokespeople announced to the press with great fanfare that WMATA had “recognized its contractual violations” after it agreed to temporarily end a provocative policy of outsourcing janitor services to non-unionized contractors. No sooner had Metro officials conceded on this demand that they announced plans to partially privatize bus services, awarding a private transport firm an \$89 million contract. Speaking of the deal, the *Washington Post* described it as “the biggest-ever contract for privatizing day-to-day operations of the agency’s core services.”

As if to add insult to injury, ATU spokespeople revealed last week that WMATA officials had lied to Metro employees and the public when they previously stated Metro would not provide private trains for participants in last weekend’s white racist rally held in Washington, D.C. In documents released to the press, ATU officials showed that not only had the transit authority provided unprecedented accommodations to the less than two dozen neo-Nazi protesters, including police protection and reserved train cars, but that the trains which were used for shuttling them to the downtown D.C. protest and back were unscheduled “special trains.”

According to ATU Local 689 President Jackie Jeter,

the operators for both trains were not made aware of who was on their trains until after the fact, and both drivers were “devastated and distraught” in learning they had unwittingly aided the hate group.

Demonstrating the bankruptcy of the ATU, Jeter and the other union bureaucrats used these revelations not to call for mass walkouts of Metro employees, but to launch a petition drive against officials in WMATA! On Thursday, the ATU held a rally in Washington, D.C. in which ATU members handed out flyers suggesting workers call their “government representative and tell them to #FireWiedefeld,” in reference to WMATA’s general manager Paul J. Wiedefeld.

Metro workers must seek complete political and organizational independence from the ATU and other trade union bureaucracies if their fight for decent pay raises, healthcare and retirement benefits as well as job security and safety is to be successful. Workers must establish independent rank-and-file committees and seek to take their struggle directly into the working class, linking up with the 240,000 United Parcel Service workers who are currently engaged in a fight against a sellout contract being pushed by their management and the Teamsters union as well as with US Postal Service workers, whose contract expires next month.

Such a struggle must be politically independent from and hostile to both the Democrats and the Republicans, who represent the political arms of the capitalist class and are responsible for decades of social austerity and degrading work conditions.

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