

Washington DC transit authority proposes cuts in services in wake of 84-day bus drivers' strike

By Nick Barrickman
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Following the signing of a new four-year contract between the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 689, transit officials have announced plans to cut bus routes and increase fares for riders of the system.

Earlier versions of the budget had said nothing about the proposed cuts in bus services. However, the latest proposal calls for the elimination and “restructuring” of 68 routes in the WMATA bus system. Employing bureaucratic language, the proposal states that cutting bus routes in areas which are already underserved will create “a stronger network of services with fewer route branches and variations and better [utilize] capacity.”

At a public hearing in January, WMATA general manager Paul J. Wiedefeld justified the cuts by citing laws limiting local funding increases to 3 percent per year. “The current constructs that we have, the financial constructs, we have to work within that [sic].” The deliberate aim of these laws is to starve the public transit network of funding.

The budget calls for a raising of fares across the board, for all trips, by 10 cents, with the longest distance trips increasing by \$1. In addition, the scheme will charge an additional 25 cents to those who pay for their fares with cash, which will disproportionately affect those with lower incomes. This is more than enough to offset the added costs from the budget’s modest improvements, including the restoration of late night services, which were cut in 2016, and free transfers between rail and bus. Riders of parallel bus systems which serve localities would not receive the free transfer.

The current budget is an exposure of the role of the

ATU, whose new contract with the WMATA in December was supposedly aimed at ending outsourcing and privatization in the Metro. As the *World Socialist Web Site Transit Workers Newsletter* warned workers at the time, the deal would “extend the low-wage regime in the private sector to the public system, while utilizing the ATU to enforce the attacks on the public workers.” This has now been confirmed.

The ATU Local 689 has yet to make an official statement on the Metro budget cuts.

The budget announcement comes after the nearly three-month strike by 130 bus workers at the Cinder Bed Road garage. The workers are employed by Transdev, which contracts with WMATA to operate several bus routes in Northern Virginia.

The 84-day strike was the longest work stoppage in WMATA’s 53-year history. Transdev workers, who earn \$12 less an hour than their public sector counterparts, demanded raises, healthcare benefits, and an end to the privatization of public services in the Washington, DC area.

The ATU forced through a tentative agreement before workers had a chance to sufficiently study the agreement. Instead, workers were forced to vote immediately after an all-day “informational” meeting at Local 689. In a statement on January 16, the ATU praised the “overwhelming” contract ratification by ATU members at Transdev.

During the nearly three-month strike, the statement adds, workers “risked eviction and foreclosure ... Many members had to delay essential medical care and spent what little savings they had. Some strikers borrowed money from friends and family to survive for nearly three months.”

While the Transdev workers were certainly willing to sacrifice, the ATU relied on this hardship to wear the strike down. The union also deliberately isolated the strike by shutting down a separate walkout of 600 bus drivers in the Northern Virginia-based Fairfax Connector bus system, also operated by Transdev, without any of the strikers' demands being met.

At the time, the ATU Local 1764 officials declared that local Democratic Party representatives had stepped into the dispute between Connector drivers and their employer, requiring they end their strike and return to the bargaining table.

In reality, the Democrats have spearheaded the cuts to social services in the DC area. They have controlled the mayor's office and the city council since home rule began in 1975. Moreover, local Democratic politicians intervened to demand that the WMATA step up its efforts to break the Cinder Bed strike.

In a statement Saturday, ATU President John A. Costa announced its endorsement of Joe Biden in the presidential primaries. As vice president under Barack Obama, Biden is directly responsible for the record increases in social inequality which were the intended product of Obama's policies, which included freezes to social spending.

The union's endorsement is a flip from 2016, when it endorsed Bernie Sanders in the primaries. However, the self-described "democratic socialist" covered for the ATU's sellout in a tweet hailing the ratification of the deal.

This was a rehash of his role in the General Motors strike last year, when he promoted the United Auto Workers, which is embroiled in a massive corruption and bribery scandal implicating much of its top leadership. In a photo-op on the picket line, Sanders ignored the role of the Obama administration in forcing through wage cuts in the auto industry in 2009.

On January 6, the date of the last publicly available bargaining update for Connector, ATU 1764 officials told workers to prepare to go back out on strike if Transdev and the union did not have an agreement within a week. "Next week in negotiations is going to be critical," stated ATU spokesperson John Ertl on the union's social media account, "we will most likely have the makings of a contract, or we may have to go out on strike again." Nearly a month's passing exposed such claims as so much hot air. Not only has no

contract proposal materialized, but the union has ceased even making public updates on the negotiations.

The latest developments within the metro system underscore the need for metro workers to take their struggle out of the hands of the ATU, as a necessary first step for organizing a genuine struggle against privatization and budget cuts. To do this, transit workers must form independent rank-and-file committees, run by workers themselves. They must appeal for support, not from the capitalist Democratic Party, but from the working class, which stands to be impacted by the attacks on public services and living conditions.

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