

Walkouts by Canadian transit workers protest lack of COVID-19 protections

By Carl Bronski
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Toronto bus drivers and mechanics, members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), have staged several spontaneous work stoppages over the past five days due to the failure of Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) management to provide them adequate protection against the highly contagious and potentially lethal coronavirus. The work refusals began Wednesday evening after it was announced that another TTC worker, a subway driver, had been diagnosed with COVID-19.

To date, 19 TTC workers have tested positive. When commuter GO Train workers and those at other services are included, at least 50 Toronto area transit workers have been infected.

On Wednesday evening, 33 drivers at the TTC's Queensway garage and another 5 workers at the Wilson depot refused to be deployed to their assigned duties. At the Queensway facility, workers engaged in a robust rally denouncing management, shouting, "We're not going to take it anymore." TTC workers have been demanding that management provide them with proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), particularly effective face-masks, as well as stepped up deep cleaning of their work areas.

Due to previous work refusals and other agitations, workers have succeeded in gaining certain protections. These include plexiglass barriers for drivers, rear door boarding, glove and hand sanitizer provision, and limited bus passenger loads. After initially opposing the provision of protective masks, the TTC switched course and agreed to distribute them. However, it only began giving them to some workers this weekend following the mounting job actions.

In Canada, when a work refusal is made citing Occupational Health and Safety protections a Ministry of Labour inspector must attend the scene to adjudicate

the issue at hand. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, there have been dozens of such work refusals across the country in multiple industries. However, government inspectors have routinely ruled against the protesting workers. At the Queensway and Wilson garages, inspectors ruled Thursday that workers must return to their posts.

On Saturday morning, another work stoppage began at the Queensway garage led by at least a dozen mechanics. Four workers have been diagnosed with the virus there and another four are now displaying symptoms. Workers demanded that a localized outbreak be declared at the garage and that the site be shut down for two weeks while effective deep cleaning measures are undertaken. An earlier cleaning of the premises has not proven effective. The facility employs 100 mechanics and 600 drivers. All employees will now be tested for infection. The work stoppage continued into at least early Sunday morning.

TTC workers have taken an important lead in fighting to safeguard their health and safety since the coronavirus crisis began. Last month, TTC afternoon-shift workers assigned to clean streetcars at the city's Roncesvalles Yard refused to carry out their duties. They cited the employer's failure to "maintain reasonable precautions to protect workers" from the spread of COVID-19. As a result of their action, the city's morning rush hour experienced some delays.

TTC management is fully aware of rising worker anger against their failure to take adequate safety precautions amid a global pandemic. When pressed further on the matter after the Roncesvalles job action, commission spokesperson Stuart Green acknowledged that its contingency plans included scenarios to alter transit schedules should more broad-based worker actions ensue.

The conflict at the TTC reflects a broader process of social polarization under way across Canada and internationally. While transit workers, nurses, doctors, grocery workers, delivery workers, and others have taken strike action and protested for safe working conditions and decisive action to combat the pandemic, the ruling elite's response to COVID-19 has been characterized by malign neglect. Governments and corporate management around the world are forcing workers to stay on the job under unsafe conditions and placing private profit ahead of human life.

Transit workers across Canada and internationally have braved the virus threat to ensure that health care and grocery store staff and other essential workers can continue to commute to their jobs. But they have paid a heavy price for management failures to safeguard workers. In the United States, as of last week, 50 Metropolitan transit workers in New York City have died from the virus. The ATU has reported 16 dead due to coronavirus outbreaks in Boston, Detroit, New Orleans and St. Louis. The Transport Workers Union has reported another 7 dead. Transit workers, in response to this mortal threat, have staged their own spontaneous work stoppages in Detroit and Birmingham, Alabama.

In Montreal, a wildcat strike broke out Thursday among Société de Transport de Montréal maintenance workers. The walkout occurred in defence of Gleason Frenette, a local union leader, who was suspended for 25 days after denouncing management's failure to implement social distancing and provide PPE to employees. Later Thursday, Quebec's pro-employer Labour Administrative Tribunal ordered the workers to return to their jobs, claiming that transit is an "essential service." 14 Montreal bus drivers have already been infected with COVID-19. Hundreds more have not been tested, but have booked off sick with symptoms.

In Edmonton, rank-and-file transit workers have called for work stoppages and begun an online petition that states, "It is clear to front-line workers that those in power are making the crisis worse. By unnecessarily packing the buses and trains, failing to provide enough PPE to workers, and failing to frequently clean the vehicles, public transit has become a lethal pipeline for viruses."

Workers can only protect themselves and their families from this deadly virus by taking independent

class action in opposition to big business and their political establishment hirelings to fight for urgent measures to combat the coronavirus on a global scale. These should include:

- Accessible and universal testing! No expense can be spared in making available free testing to all those who show symptoms.
- Free high-quality treatment and equality of care! The most advanced medical care must be made available to everyone, regardless of income or insurance coverage.
- Paid sick leave for all workers! No one must be forced to work if they are sick or have been exposed to the coronavirus, endangering themselves and others.
- Protect refugees, prisoners and the homeless! Everyone must have access to high-quality and clean living conditions to prevent the spread of the disease.
- Safe working conditions! All workers must have a safe work environment and be protected against the spread of the virus. Where there is a danger, workplaces and schools must be closed and full compensation paid by the employers and the state. Health care and other essential workers must be provided all the equipment and resources necessary to protect them from the coronavirus.

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