

The San Diego Bus Driver Strike: The Value of Public Transport and Public Transport Workers

As someone who has made transit appreciation the majority of my personality, I'm used to fielding questions about navigating systems that many Americans have been conditioned to both distrust and disparage. Those questions increased in frequency when a partial bus operator strike began in mid-May, affecting as much as half of the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS)'s daily bus trips. Confusion reigned as riders were surprised that a "South Bay strike" meant route 1 buses in Hillcrest or route 921 buses in Mira Mesa never arrived. To understand how we got here, and importantly, to know which bus routes are worth waiting for while the strike persists, we need to get into the weeds of the collective entity that the public knows as "MTS", and how the insidious trend of public service privatization has degraded the lives of both operators and transit riders in the San Diego region.

While MTS presents uniform branding to riders, it can best be described as somewhere between two and three transit agencies in a trenchcoat. Like many metropolitan areas throughout America, San Diego County has been home to a shifting number of transit agencies over the last century. Artifacts of these old agencies are still visible today ("700" bus routes were once operated by Chula Vista Transit, for example) but at present, the number of agencies is stable at

two - NCTD serving the North and MTS serving Central, South, East, and some Northeastern routes. Under the exterior branding of these two agencies is a more complex mix of agency-operated and contractor-delegated routes. For MTS, an entity referred to as San Diego Transit Corporation (SDTC), technically a subsidiary of MTS, operates most routes that those at UCSD will be familiar with, including the SuperLoop (201, 202), 30, 41, 43, 44, and many others. If you haven't had any trouble finding a bus on a route during the current strike, and that route wasn't in East County, you were probably on an SDTC bus. The rest are operated by contractors. A company called Transdev operates the majority of the remaining "fixed route" service. Transdev operates almost all bus routes in South Bay as well as a handful of routes in the central and northern parts of the City of San Diego including routes 1, 3, 5, 27, 28, and 35. Paratransit (ADA-subsidized point-to-point trips that riders with disabilities can request) and routes that use minibuses (UCSD-adjacent routes 974 and 985 for example) are operated by First Transit, but I'm not going to talk about First here both for simplicity and because First was recently bought by Transdev, which adds another layer of complexity. First has also been striking recently, causing paratransit, minibus, and rural route disruptions.

If your head is spinning at the moment, don't worry, there's only one fact that matters for the rest of our discussion: bus operators who drive SDTC routes are MTS employees, and bus operators who drive contracted routes are not. The

union for SDTC operators negotiates with the MTS board, which is composed of local elected officials. But for Transdev drivers, MTS simply gives Transdev a lump sum of money and washes their hands of the need to deal with labor. How different could the working conditions be for workers doing essentially the same job for what is, for all intents and purposes, the same employer at the end of the day? As it turns out, they are quite different.

There are three CBAs governing SDTC and Transdev operators - one for SDTC, one for Transdev drivers based out of the South Bay Division in Chula Vista (I'll call it TDSB), and one for the Transdev drivers based out of the El Cajon Division (I'll call it TDEC). For the current year of their respective CBAs, SDTC drivers make between \$22.24 and \$31.25, TDSB drivers make between \$19.00 and \$27.00, and TDEC drivers make between \$17.86 and \$23.31. In addition, both SDTC and TD divisions use "split shifts", a work schedule that contains several hours of unpaid break time in the middle of the day. For example, one shift that will be available starting after the service change in June at SDTC will have the operator reporting to Kearny Mesa by 6:17am, driving route 235 until 10:50am, and returning to the depot for an unpaid break at 3:00pm before driving route 237 until 6:17pm. This is a 12 hour shift, of which only 8 hours and 7 minutes are compensated. This is the worst example I could find in SDTC's duty book, which their union kindly posts on its website. I haven't been able to find TDSB's duty books or union contract, but according to operators interviewed by the Union-Tribune, the situation is much

worse. According to the Union-Tribune, 14% of SDTC's shifts are split shifts with an average of between 1 and 3 hours of unpaid break time. In contrast, Transdev's last, best offer to TDSB workers during this strike has been 20% split shifts, down from the current 25% of shifts having multiple hours of unpaid break. On Monday June 5th, San Diego bus drivers rejected that "final offer." Additionally, workers that UT spoke to indicated that their unpaid breaks are longer than those in SDTC's schedules, as TDSB split shifts are as long as 13 or 14 hours with 4 or 5 unpaid break hours. Workers are not even given decent facilities to rest during this time. TDSB driver Francisco Cota showed UT a dilapidated trailer, saying "...it's full of mice and feces. There's roaches in there. It's insulting."

There's plenty more to say about the working conditions for bus operators in our city. Workers in both SDTC and Transdev units have perennial problems with sanitary restroom facilities on routes and are tasked with being the frontline response to all the myriad consequences of capitalism that have made buses and trolley cars the last, best source of shelter in the city for thousands of suffering people. The question then is why we have contractors who abuse their employees. The best answer I can find is that we have contractors because they abuse their employees. According to an announcement of a contract renewal between MTS and Transdev in 2015, MTS spent \$76 million operating SDTC and paid Transdev \$49 million to operate a relatively similar number of miles driven. But Transdev does not supply buses, MTS owns them and in recent years has

provided dozens of brand new vehicles for Transdev to operate. Among currently active buses, the average age of an SDTC-operated bus is 8 years, while the average Transdev-operated bus is 6 years old, the oldest 83 buses in the combined fleet are SDTC's responsibility, and all new bus purchases are financed publicly by MTS and SANDAG. Transdev doesn't own its facilities either. MTS purchased and renovated the El Cajon and South Bay depots. We are therefore left with labor as the only thing of tangible value that Transdev provides. The Union Tribune even refers to Transdev as "a staffing agency" in its most recent article on the strike.

I spoke with an acquaintance, who will remain anonymous, and who works for a transit contractor, (which doesn't operate in San Diego to my knowledge). When I asked him what value transit contractors give to municipalities, he replied, "labor flexibility." I've been thinking about that phrase quite a bit in the last several days as I contemplated how to put this article together. "Labor flexibility" means 14 hour split shifts, it means paying substantially less per hour, it means more mandatory overtime, it means break facilities infested with vermin and covered in excrement. When considering why MTS would subcontract service, perhaps a less euphemistic way of putting it would be, "the cruelty is the point."

When people ask me why I care so much about transit, the reason boils down to the fact that I can't imagine a just world without it. Requiring car ownership for economic

security is a way of enforcing class stratification, a way of making sure more people only live to service debt. The more parking lots we build, the less space is left for humans to live, and the interests of those who wish to keep home prices as unattainable as possible are satisfied. Highways carve up minority and working class neighborhoods, bringing with them increased rates of asthma and car crashes as suburbanites race through, using their cars to avoid seeing the externalities their lifestyle creates. It's no accident that the lifted pickup truck has become a core part of the American fascist aesthetic. Inside one, you don't have to see the million ways in which society is collapsing around your air conditioned cabin, and if someone tries to make you notice, well, we saw how that played out on the streets in 2020 and in red state legislatures since then. To all of this, the neoliberal politician on the MTS board says, "ok, you may have transit, but only as long as my car remains superior, and only as long as the system's labor remains an underclass to me and my donors." This cannot remain the status quo. The transit system is its workers, and the workers are the system. As long as they are marginalized, the system will remain marginalized and eternally vulnerable to the right's attempts to destroy it. There is a long way to go before we can say that the bus operators have succeeded in taking what belongs to them, but the first step is to end contracting and its extraction of value from our public services at the expense of labor.

Alex