

The Unions and the Rabid Right in the US

The Bay Area Rapid Transit system (BART) is the public light rail system for the San Francisco Bay Area, and they almost went on strike a few days ago. Or maybe they didn't; maybe the whole thing was stitched up from the beginning.

Like all public agencies, BART has been running a deficit due to the economic crisis plus the government funding priorities (all the money the banks and finance capital want; nothing for the public sector). On top of that, the stars are aligning for increased attacks on all workers: The economic crisis and layoffs are putting workers in a weaker position on the job, and the union leaders are moving to an even weaker position (if such a thing is possible). In the case of BART, its ridership has declined by 11% since July of 2008. This is due to the recession, since most of BART's riders are commuters who use it to get to work, and many of those riders have since lost their jobs. This has increased BART's deficit.

Just as is the case when the banks who took federal money gave massive bonuses to their executives, so BART management is exempt from the results of the economic crisis. Management gave themselves a raise in 2009 and bonuses of \$10,000 (or more). They have been guilty of massive mismanagement, including spending \$337 million on train control software that they couldn't use. Naturally, the corporate controlled media covered this up.

\$100 Million in Pay Cuts

However, when the several different unions came to negotiate new contracts with BART, the management moved for major cuts. Smelling blood, they were determined to reduce their labor costs by \$100 million over the next four years. The leadership of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) submitted two different concessionary contracts to the members, only to have both of them rejected. BART management then said it would impose a new contract, and the union threatened to strike if it did.

"Public Anger"

The corporate-controlled media pitched in, encouraging a "public" outpouring of anger at the BART workers. They totally failed to cover the way management has been milking the system. They failed to show the massive waste of management. Instead, they encouraged the thinking that, "everybody is taking cuts in pay and benefits now; why do you think you are different? Why shouldn't you too?"

This never reached past the stage of letters to the editor, etc. However, had there been an actual strike, things would very possibly have gotten even nastier.

In this context, we should not forget the rabid right's mobilization around the health care issue. In some instances, they have actually taken to carrying assault weapons to their protests. (This is legal in some states.) Supposedly this was to assert their right to carry arms – something guaranteed by the US Constitution. In reality, it served as a threat to their political opponents.

Union Leaders' Reliance on Democrats

The dependence of the union leadership on the Democratic Party has helped prevent them from launching an aggressive, worker-oriented struggle. In the case of health care, they have failed to mobilize their base. As well, their reliance on the Democrats as their spokespeople has meant that the case against the private insurers is not really made adequately. This is grist for the mill of the rabid right. In the case of the direct union contract struggles – such as that at BART – the reliance on the Democrats means no wider struggle for workers' interests in general. This isolates those workers who are trying to prevent cuts, such as the BART workers.

As this crisis continues, the threat from the rabid right cannot be discounted, and a socialist/working class struggle must be developed as an alternative.

Another Struggle

NOTE: While the BART struggle was grabbing the headlines here, another battle is developing, one which has not been noted by the press, but as clearly shows the problems. This is the struggle of Nate Holmes, former employee of the Tenderloin Housing Clinic in San Francisco. A ten-year employee, Nate had been instrumental in bring the union into his work place and served as a shop steward in his union (SEIU Local 1021). After filing a series of grievances, Nate was first transferred and then fired on trumped-up charges. When he tried to file for arbitration on his firing, his union stalled and it is still not clear that they are willing to file. In any case, as he put it, they have held his struggle at arms-length, not being involved in his different protests.

The disciplining and firing of union militants has gone on in the US for decades, with little response from the union officials. In fact, at times they have even cooperated in this. The overall effect is to stifle work-place militancy and independent thinking, thus allowing the officials to maintain their friendly relations with the employers. This also plays a key role in the general lack of class consciousness amongst US workers.