



COMMITTEE FOR ONE FIGHTING TRANSIT UNION

August 17, 2025

ATU • SMART • TCU at LA Metro



L.A. Metro Workers: Stand Together! One Enemy, One Union

No worker will be immune from the tsunami of attacks unleashed by Trump as he remakes the U.S. economy for the bosses' benefit. Gutted collective bargaining rights and mass layoffs, tariffs and trade wars, rampant inflation and deep recession—the future is anything but bright for working people. Mass transit, like many other vital social services, is on the chopping block as Trump reclaims previously allocated federal funds to reduce or redirect spending to the new priorities of the ruling class. In particular, he is shutting down green initiatives in blue states—putting L.A. Metro's federally financed Olympics expansion on rather shaky ground. None of this bodes well for Metro's unionized workforce—or its poor, working-class ridership for that matter.

The Democrats who run the city, county and state are not about to come to the rescue. Their devastation of workers' living standards brought Trump to the fore in the first place, and L.A. mayor Karen Bass is herself about to pick up the ax to chop at jobs and services in response to a near billion-dollar budget shortfall. To hold the line in the face of uncertainty and chaos, it falls to workers to actively defend jobs, working and living conditions and those among the oppressed currently in the crosshairs. But at the moment, the unions—the very organizations that must mobilize such a defense—are ill-prepared for the task confronting them.

The best defense is one rooted in workers' numbers, common organization and operational unity. But the overall landscape at L.A. Metro is very much the opposite: divisions abound among transit workers. The workforce is around half Latino, who tend to handle the dirtier jobs, laboring beside Asian immigrants, themselves divided by nationality. White workers are a decided minority, largely concentrated in higher-paid positions, whereas black workers and women fill lower-paid job titles. These divisions—by race, by nationality, by craft—are deepened and hardened by divisions in organization. Transit workers are split into three separate unions and multiple locals: ATU Local 1277 (mechanics and service attendants), TCU Local 1315 (custodians and clerical workers) and six SMART locals (bus and rail operators). These dividing lines are further enforced by resetting the seniority of any worker who switches jobs between them.

“Divide and rule” is the name of the bosses' game, and

the union leaderships are willing players, not least by fiercely throwing up barriers to merging the unions in order to protect their turf at the membership's expense. These barriers only magnify the racial, ethnic and gender divisions that rear their ugly head daily, often in the fight over the scarce bit of “privileges” that Metro doles out. The bosses wield their control over promotions to higher tiers and qualifications to promote an individualistic consciousness among workers, who are pitted against one another for access to overtime, job training and cleaner, easier job assignments (often along racial lines).

This dog-eat-dog scramble among workers to protect their livelihoods is only going to intensify as things go increasingly downhill. The crackdown on immigrants and other oppressed sectors in society at large cannot but find reflection inside the unions. Every form of antagonism will be further aggravated, and the pressure will be all the greater to grab more tightly ahold of whatever individual lifeline is at hand. But at best, this will provide about as much relief as stepping atop a small rock that is part of a rapidly descending landslide down a mountain. Far better to work in unison with as many others as possible to fend off disaster before it gains unstoppable momentum. Workers at one another's throats for their cut of better jobs, limited overtime and shrinking resources only ensures they all lose out in the end, whereas joint defensive struggle now against the common enemy unlocks the possibility of fighting for more for everyone as soon as circumstances permit.

Industrial Unions Benefit All Workers

For that to happen, though, the deadly brew of divisions must be neutralized. First and foremost, the obstacle of separate organization needs to be overcome through the merger of the existing unions into one industrial union. While not a full cure, all Metro workers banding together in the same union would be a huge improvement, making it considerably easier to combat every other problem and false polarization afflicting the workforce. For this very reason, a couple of mechanics initiated the Committee for One Fighting Transit Union (COFTU) last year, a mission every transit worker should support.

According to COFTU, while many TCU and SMART members recognize that “united we’re strong,” sentiment among ATU mechanics is more mixed. Skilled workers often think they can go it alone against the bosses. After all, with fewer workers overall sharing their skill set, they consider themselves to be not so easy to replace. But such a calculation is off, especially in times of turmoil like now as the economy careens toward recession and a contraction in the total number of jobs, including for mechanics. If need be,



ATU Local 1277

Then-ATU Local 1277 president Art Aguilar endorsing Democrat Karen Bass in 2022 L.A. mayoral election.

the bosses could even run the transit system for a period of time without mechanics, no matter how great their individual skill—but not so in the case of the bus and train operators. When it comes time to force concessions on a workforce, the bosses often point the finger at the highest compensated workers as the biggest problem in need of fixing. A common fear among mechanics is that a merger of the ATU and SMART would leave them a distinct minority in the new union and drown their interests in the sea of operators. But in fact, mechanics have every reason to pursue a merger—strength lies not only in numbers, but also in the combination of the crafts into a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Any effort to merge the unions will not likely get very far without a core of mechanics on board. A demonstrated commitment on the part of the better-off section of the workforce to join with their fellow workers will be crucial to counter blowback from the existing union leaderships, which have staked their careers on enforcing craft divisions. Such a demonstration would encourage even more TCU and SMART members to actively campaign for a merger.

The destructiveness of craft unionism is underscored by the division of the cleaners between the ATU (service attendants) and TCU (custodians). These workers perform functionally the same cleaning job, just in different areas, but receive unequal compensation. Lower pay fuels frustration within the TCU (and SMART too), while the service attendants are led to believe by the ATU leadership that their

wages would decrease in the event of a merger. In fact, separation depresses wages, including of ATUers, who accept company offers thinking that “it could be worse,” while TCU and SMART members feel impotent due to the lack of support from the other unions and the betrayals of their leadership. To address the frustrations on the one side and the fears on the other, a serious merger campaign would fight for equal pay for equal work at the highest rate and an end to all the bosses’ tricks to create infighting and leave everyone with less. These include tiers (for example, the five levels of bus mechanics), steps (two, three, even eleven years to get top pay) and bifurcated pensions (a lower rate for those hired after 2012).

Accustomed to unions as they have been run by their bureaucracies, many workers of all crafts understandably cling to the small gains they have been able to carve out for themselves. Operators who spent years working split shifts or the extra board—shifts that change daily on as little as eight hours’ notice—or mechanics who finally got a slice of the weekend off—worry that merging unions and seniority lists would strip them of the little they’ve got. But here is the rub. Easily the surest way to defend what workers have now is to focus on forging collective union power. In doing so, the union tops’ bureaucratic inertia can be broken through, and the unions transformed into centers for the fighting defense of the workers as part of propelling their combination into one.

Only by this path will it be possible to bring forward a leadership with a plan to protect the interests of all workers. The point is to use the power of one union to defend gains already won and demand new solutions that come at the expense of the company and not one another. For example, shortening everyone’s workweek without any loss in pay (that is, all receive the same amount they had on their paycheck, or more) would reduce workloads and leave plenty of spots for new hires. The first necessary step to get there, though, is to stand together.

Union leaders betrayed powerful 2003 Metro ATU strike. They sent ranks back to work without a contract, leaving other Metro unions, which respected ATU picket lines, out in the cold. Separate unions in one industry screw everyone.



Committee for One Fighting Transit Union calls:

- * To merge ATU, SMART and TCU to fight for the highest pay and benefits for all!
- * To stop funding the bosses’ parties, Democrat or Republican! Increase strike funds now!
- * To abolish tiers and steps! Equal pay for equal work!
- * To abolish PEPRA second-tier pensions! 23-and-out full & free pensions for all!
- * To coordinate action across the workforce! Down with union probation and the no-strike clause!
- * To defend immigrants with union action, not sanctuary state and city scams!
- * For a fight to end segregation on and off the job!
- * For free, convenient and plentiful mass transit for all!

L.A. Metro Mechanic on Explosion at BYD Bus Factory

For Union Control of Safety and Training!

The following is a *Workers Vanguard* interview of an ATU Local 1277 and COFTU member. It provides a firsthand account of a devastating explosion that occurred on December 4 at Metro supplier BYD's electric bus manufacturing facility in Lancaster, California. One BYD worker who suffered severe burns has yet to return to work, and it is unclear if he ever will be able to.

As explained in the interview, this accident stemmed from chronic safety violations at BYD. We led an effort to address this issue at the January ATU Local 1277 meetings. Our motion adopted at these meetings stress that "leaving control of safety in the hands of the company rather than the union is deadly." This is true of BYD and Metro alike. Our initiative demonstrates how workers can mobilize to advance the struggle to enforce safety in the workplace. The unions must exercise their power and *shut down* unsafe work!

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WV: *What happened at the BYD bus factory in Lancaster last December?*

Joe: I was doing a routine procurement inspection inside a bus with a co-worker of mine, and we realized there was someone on top of the bus. No one's supposed to be on the bus but us when we're doing these inspections. Suddenly, there was a huge explosion—a huge fireball outside at the rear of the bus. We jumped off the bus, and I heard a scream, like a death scream. I saw a young worker engulfed in flames, so I ran to the back of the bus as he was trying to pat out the fire, but it wouldn't go out. He tried to get off the top of the bus onto the scaffolding next to him, but tumbled down the stairs of the scaffolding to the ground. I took my jacket off, but I realized that it was polyester, and it wouldn't be a good idea to pat him down with it because it was gonna melt.

A woman working with him helped pat him down, and she got the fire out. There was a lot of smoke and fire extinguisher gas. While I was with him on the ground, doing what I could to help put out the fire, I realized there was no one around him except his co-workers; there was no management, no supervision, nobody. And so, no one came with a first-aid kit until the fire was out.

WV: *What do you think caused this accident?*

Joe: There's a couple of things. One, the young worker—I found out his name is Jose Sosa—should not have been assigned to work up there on top of the bus. The policy is when we from L.A. Metro are on the bus inspecting it, nobody else is supposed to be there. But they had to get up there and rush to get the task done because we had previously inspected this bus and had written up a few items that needed to be corrected. In an effort to expedite these corrections, they had us inspect it; but at the same time, they had BYD factory workers perform some repairs. That's the first mistake. The other thing is, BYD workers didn't have any protective gear on. They come to work with basically their own street clothes: Levi's and a t-shirt or whatever, and their work shoes.

This young worker actually worked on a different part of the assembly line, where they install high-voltage cables. But that part of the assembly line works on cold assemblies. In other words, they don't have any batteries on them yet. He's used to installing cables that aren't hot or live. But I was told that he was called over to correct the installation of the cables on the bus that we were inspecting. He may have known how to do that, but not live, not with a hot bus, not with a bus that is fully assembled and ready to go with the batteries installed. When the battery's hot, there's a whole shutdown procedure that you have to follow. And then once that's done, you have to check it to make sure that it's actually shut down and make sure that what you're working on is cold. I believe that's what caused the accident—that this young worker probably wasn't trained on how to work on the bus when it's hot and fully assembled and charged.

I thought the whole bus was going to explode. I thought the whole factory was going to explode because maybe there was going to be a chain reaction. And I hadn't been informed about an evacuation procedure in the event of emergency. I hadn't been informed about where first aid is, who's responsible for first aid, the whole emergency event procedure, nothing.

WV: *What are conditions like at BYD?*

Joe: I was surprised. BYD is a major manufacturer of buses

used around the world. But you wouldn't know it looking at it. It's very chaotic—one of the first things you notice when you walk in is the workers aren't in uniform, and they're not in safety gear. Last summer, workers there staged a sick-out for one day in opposition to the terrible conditions.

It's a difficult job to assemble a modern transit bus. Everything's fitted in just so in a certain way, making the job difficult. I was impressed with the workers, who have figured out how to do things when the company basically gives them a job and leaves them to their own devices.

WV: *What do you think needs to be done to make sure that such accidents don't happen again?*

Joe: When workers rely on the company to take care of their safety, their training, it always falls short. What the company might have put together for situations like this might look good on paper, but when something actually occurs, that's a whole different thing. It highlights the flaws in the general plan. So, because of that, you can't depend on the company.

As a union worker, I believe that in a union facility, the union needs to take charge of training and the procedures that need to be carried out, the protocols that need to be followed. Because the union's interest in what the worker does is not the same as the company's. The unions look out for the worker, and the company looks out for the company. If you depend on the company to look out for your welfare, there's a huge risk.

When the accident happened, I shouted up to the [supervision and management offices], "Where's the first aid?" They looked right back at me and said, "We don't know."

WV: *Why should L.A. Metro workers care about what happens at BYD?*

Joe: BYD's a union shop. SMART Local 105. Just like the workers at L.A. Metro, we're part of the same class. Their interests are our interests. What we may be able to establish at Metro because we're the more well-established union in the area can be an example of how things could or should be done. And it shows worker solidarity when you support any worker—unionized worker, documented worker, undocumented worker—looking out for the interests of somebody that is not even in your workplace.

Metro workers are asked to work at any number of places throughout L.A. County. We work at a lot of different companies and facilities. And it's in the interest of the Metro employees to have some control over the safety of the places where they work—at a Metro facility or anywhere else. At BYD, we had no say in safety guidelines, procedures, evacuation. Metro workers don't want to go into an unsafe situation; and if it is unsafe, we have to be able to stop what we're doing and remove ourselves.

Now that brings us to the question, who decides these things? Who decides what's safe or not safe? It has to be the union. The union needs to call the shots, develop the

procedures and the guidelines and determine what equipment is necessary to work in a safe environment.

Here's where it gets tough. We have a union that helps to a certain point, but often the union leadership cooperates with Metro to speed up things or cut corners, particularly when it comes to safety.

WV: *What needs to happen to change this situation?*

Joe: I'm a member of the Committee for One Fighting Transit Union (COFTU) at Metro. We put forward a motion at a recent ATU meeting that passed. One of the things we decided was to donate \$1,000 to Jose, the BYD worker who was burned badly. He was in the hospital for quite some time recovering from his burns. The motion also said that workers must be able to stop working in situations they identify as unsafe, that this has to be backed up by the union deliberately and directly and that SMART Local 105 at BYD ought to do the same thing. We also decided to put together a team of ATU and SMART workers to inspect BYD's facilities.

And right now, what we have is a safety committee with ten members, but more than half of them are management and supervision, so that means they have control over safety. That's why another union brother put forward a motion calling for our ATU local to establish a safety committee authorized to shut down specific work in unsafe conditions. This motion also passed.

But it's been months, and all the leadership has done is post up sign-up sheets for members to join the safety committee. But the way they describe the committee on the sheets is not at all what was in the motion. It just says it will be made up of "helpful ATU 1277 members who will provide assistance to other workers in facilitating a safe work environment...willing to learn, teach, and assist those in need of securing such."

And also, the leadership says the committee can't shut down unsafe work, even though that's what's in the motion that passed. At every step, no matter what is done or said, their response is, "No, we can't do this because of either some law or some rule—or it's just a bad idea." It's the complete opposite of what you would expect from a leadership that has the interests of the workers in mind. It's difficult for me to wrap my head around the fact that the leadership could betray the union this way.

It's a big problem with the leadership. They don't wanna really put any teeth in it. It's pretty weak what they're suggesting. What they're saying is, "Oh, we can just talk to people" and not have any real effect. The leadership deliberately misguides the membership away from understanding the power the union can have.

Because of the leadership's resistance, the membership will have to fight to give the committee real union power.

Watch a video on the petition to merge!

