

CATS union workers edge closer to a strike after an alleged wage freeze

By Dillon Lowe

Transit union employees of the [Capital Area Transit System](#) are “closer than ever” to a strike after CATS bypassed negotiations with the union to impose its own labor contract at the end of January, according to union leadership.

Anthony Garland, the international vice president for [Amalgamated Transit Union 1546](#), tells *Daily Report* that CATS took a hardline stance by implementing its own contract terms without union approval in an effort to avoid a strike—a move that has only served to further inflame tensions between the two parties.

Garland says the new contract includes a few items that the union tentatively agreed to in negotiations but does not address wages, which are central to the union’s demands. In fact, he says the contract actually imposes a three-year freeze on wage increases.

“We can’t allow a company to impose and implement its own labor contract on its workforce,” Garland says. “If we do that, they won’t agree with anything the union’s saying when we go to the table. They’ll just implement what they want to. Now we have no choice but to strike.”

The new contract also includes changes to disciplinary, grievance and overtime policies that were made without union input, Garland says. Union organizers are now gathering in Baton Rouge to deliberate their next steps.

CATS, however, says it is continuing to operate with no new contract in place and that it is prepared to proceed with interest arbitration to bring the dispute to a fair and timely resolution. The agency has previously contended that it does not have adequate funds to meet the union’s demands.

“CATS remains fully committed to securing a fair and equitable contract that benefits our employees, customers and the broader community,” a statement provided to *Daily Report* reads. “While the possibility of a strike is a concern, CATS is focused on finding a swift resolution to prevent any service disruptions.”

Stanley Smalls, a senior organizer with ATU, says he's hard at work gathering data to commission a report on CATS' financials. His analysis has found that the agency's administrative salaries make up a disproportionate share of its budget.

According to Smalls, 53 managers at CATS collectively earn \$4 million in salaries while 153 union workers share a \$7 million payroll. Those figures have not been independently verified by *Daily Report*.

While both Garland and Smalls declined to speculate on when exactly a strike might commence, Smalls says workers could walk off the job within the next 30 days if a resolution is not reached. ATU 1546 and CATS previously agreed to extend their old labor contract—originally set to expire on Dec. 31—through Jan. 31.

Tensions between ATU 1546 and CATS over their labor contract began brewing late last year. The union says transit workers in Jefferson Parish, New Orleans and Shreveport all make about \$4 or \$5 more per hour than CATS workers do. Union members voted to authorize a strike in late January.

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