

Bus drivers in Aspen, Colorado, enduring company housing and harassment, set to strike January 1

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The Colorado Department of Labor (CDOL) authorized workers for the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority in Colorado to strike on January 1, 2025. The Amalgamated Transit Union 1774 issued a notice to strike in September, which required approval from CDOL under state law.

Under the current contract between the ATU and RFTA workers cannot strike this year. If no agreement is reached by January 1, 2025 workers will strike at midnight on New Year's Day, one of the busiest days in the organization's schedule.

However, the Colorado Department of Labor stated that it would "closely monitor whether a strike, especially if progress is lacking toward agreement on a collective bargaining agreement, may come to interfere with the preservation of the public peace, health, and safety enough to justify an order disallowing a strike and mandating arbitration."

In other words, the government reserves the right to ban the strike at any moment on the pretext of so-called "public interest," much as the federal government banned a national rail strike in late 2022. To rally support in the working class and oppose collusion with the government by union bureaucrats, workers formed the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. They are currently fighting against yet another round of sellout contracts.

RFTA employs 160 bus drivers and provides public transit routes in several mountain towns, including the resort town of Aspen, Colorado, one of the most expensive places in the United States.

According to Realtor.com the median home price is listed at \$3 million in Aspen while the cost of renting is well over \$2,500 a month for a one-bedroom apartment. The area, long coveted by the ultra wealthy for its famous ski resorts, has been inundated with multi-million dollar luxury homes and a severe lack of affordable housing.

Relying on company or government-sponsored housing, effectively living in a modern day version of a company town, is not uncommon in the expensive mountain towns around Aspen. This housing is often much cheaper than on the private real estate market and can be the difference between affording expenses and destitution.

Around 80 employees live in company housing, many of whom will be put out on the street on April 30, 2025 if management has its way.

Drivers currently receive a starting pay rate of \$30.60 and a top rate of \$38.76 after seven years. At top rate pay drivers make around \$4,800 a month after taxes, meaning they can easily pay more than half of their usable income on rent alone.

Management of RFTA, led by CEO Kurt Ravenschlag, have offered limited wage increases up to \$31.05 for starting pay and \$40 for top pay, a paltry increase of just 1.5 percent and 3 percent respectively.

The union rejected the proposal, saying, "Yesterday, the company gave us their 'final' wage proposal—an across the board increase of under 3% over three years. Since 2021, inflation has raised the cost of living by over 16%, to say nothing of increased housing costs in our communities," adding that "While RFTA sits on over \$100 million in cash, it has told us to sit down and be grateful for table scraps."

A bus driver with RFTA told the WSWs that the union is proposing a \$46 top rate, or 18.6 percent. The driver also stated that the union had demanded an \$800 a month stipend to cover housing costs but was rejected by management, even though a consultant had recommended a similar policy to RFTA.

Speaking on the proposed wage increase he said "Wages have not kept up with inflation. Forty-six dollars? The way housing prices keep going up in this area,

apartments will go up beyond what \$46 will cover.”

“Our cost of living is among the highest in the country but management will not agree to a pay raise. They tried to tell us we were getting one but on closer examination there was no new money in the contract proposal. I currently live in company sponsored housing but they are kicking me out April 30 along with anyone who has been in such housing for five years or more.”

He added that he believed that management was trying to push workers out of housing to save money. “They want to bring in new drivers at a lower wage. CEO had the audacity to tell a driver that he could afford a 30-year mortgage in the valley on \$39 per hour. He has justified his actions by ‘being a good steward of the taxpayers money.’”

“I’m getting by on \$39 an hour,” he said, “but if rent goes above \$2,000 a month there’s no way I can make it. But I’m single. For drivers with families I am sure it’s a different story. I expect rent to rise. It has gone up every year in the years I’ve been here.”

These are only some of the issues transportation workers are facing. Management has also taken a belligerent attitude toward workers, implementing an arbitrary “fatigue monitoring system” that management claims is a safety measure but is in reality a humiliating and unproven test workers must pass before every shift.

“I feel that management has been gaslighting us at every turn. Our CEO will not budge on a single issue. He requires all drivers to take an ‘Alert Meter’ computer-based test before every shift. There’s no evidence that it’s a valid test. He wants to terminate anyone who fails it. He can’t do that now under the current CBA [collective bargaining agreement] though. He also wants to implement arbitrary work rules and uniforms which nobody wants.”

The “Alert Meter” test displays a number of graphics to the driver who has to select the correct graphic for a number of questions lasting around two minutes. If they fail the test three times they are not allowed to drive. The *Aspen Times* interviewed a driver who stated that the test is not based on any regulatory framework and that “RFTA bus drivers are the only true transit drivers in the world being forced to take this test daily.”

RFTA claims the test is to prevent fatigued drivers from operating vehicles. Winter can be a busy and demanding time as the ski season brings thousands of riders to the area. But management ignores the fact that fatigue must be addressed through proper staffing and work scheduling.

The authority’s budget documents admit that it completed the 2022/2023 winter season with 40 drivers under its staffing goal. This condition of understaffing, which inevitably leads to the overworking of drivers, is entirely the fault of management and its refusal to offer a reasonable wage to its employees.

Unlike other transportation services that are deeply underfunded, such as the New York MTA, RFTA has a budget surplus. Largely funded through local sales tax, the transportation authority’s 2024 budget accounts for a \$4 million surplus, bringing total reserve funds to \$69 million above annual expenses and owed debts. Budget projections over the next few decades anticipate the authority will retain revenues above expenses.

Even so, workers everywhere are told by management that they must accept substandard wage increases and poor staffing. Ravenschlag told workers he is a “steward of taxpayer money,” that is, he is determined to keep wages and costs down to satisfy the ultra-wealthy interests that have turned Colorado’s mountain towns into multi-millionaires’ playgrounds.

This phenomenon is occurring in every industry, among private companies and public service alike. Boeing workers are striking to demand a 40 percent pay increase to cover more than a decade of stagnant wages, while dock workers struck to demand a more than 70 percent wage increase and protections against automation, protections the union bureaucracy abandoned when they called off the strike after just three days.

Meanwhile, the New York MTA is preparing attacks on workers to make up for billions of dollars in underfunding.



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