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FAST FACTS

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RESPECT is the foundation for an improved public transit network

Workers at Winnipeg Transit have twice rejected the contracts negotiated between their union (Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1505) and the Transit management. A third version of the contract, with some of the issues due to go to binding arbitration (meaning a neutral arbitrator will review both sides and impose a compromise solution) will be voted on August 20th by the ATU membership. The Union executive has decided that they will go on strike immediately should this third contract be rejected by the membership.

In large part, the contract refusals have been about dignity: Transit workers feel they are treated with contempt by management, and are frustrated with management's ongoing attempts to wring concessions out of them during negotiations over the past two decades. The wage offer over three years is only 2%, 2.2%, and 3% - in comparison to the recently posted inflation rate of 2.4% - and is below the amount won by most provincial government employees in their last contract negotiations (often seen as an indicator of what other unionized workers can expect). However, the real anger over the contract revolves around non-wage factors. The drivers in particular are upset over the attempt to worsen already-frustrating 'split

shifts'. A percentage of shifts every day are 'split', which means the driver works during the morning busy period, is "off duty" for a number of hours, and then goes back to work for the evening busy period. Split shifts create very long work days, with an unpaid break in the middle that sometimes lasts for four hours - long enough to extend the working day substantially, but not really long enough to allow the driver to do much of anything but wait around for her/his shift to resume. Sundays, in particular, are a point of contention this year: management attempted to simultaneously lengthen Sunday shifts, remove the 'Sunday premium' top-up of one hour's wage, and increase the number of shifts on Sunday that can be split from 60% to 80%. Needless to say, Transit drivers see this as a significant concession, and are concerned about the move to more split shifts.

There are a large number of other issues related to respect as well. Some, like management's attempt to progressively reduce with every absence - even for sick or bereavement leave - the drivers' 'coffee pay' (a yearly lump-sum provided to the drivers in compensation for not receiving breaks during their shifts) and refusing to pay wages for often significant travel time (aside from an hour's pay to attend patronizing 'interviews' when workers



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get written up), have come up during the recent negotiations. Many others are ongoing problems: 'writing up' workers for incredibly minor and petty issues; bad feelings about how 'stop calling' - where the driver announces the next stop - was implemented; and the ongoing problem of what some workers see as management 'stonewalling' on grievances (leading to more arbitration cases, higher costs for the union, and extra fees having to be assessed on members to pay for it).

Past contract negotiations have demonstrated Transit's lack of good will. These negotiations between Transit workers and management have come at times when a transit strike would have had a significant impact on the city, including during the 1999 Pan Am Games and the 2006 Grey Cup. While the workers have had interest in taking action, the city administration (including the Mayor's Office according to some accounts) have put a lot of pressure on the Union not to strike during these events - but have followed this up with an ongoing lack of respect for the drivers and maintenance workers at Transit, exacerbating the bad feelings and problems described above. Although the pressure of tens of thousands of university students in September will mean that a strike will pressure Transit management to settle quickly, regardless of whether or not the Transit workers do go on strike it is increasingly apparent that the current situation at Transit is untenable.

A climate where Transit workers are treated disrespectfully, and where the union's goodwill is tested with every negotiation (including lockout threats by management during the most recent round) will lead to a shaky foundation for a much-needed public-transportation expansion. As recognition grows of the ecological damage caused by the widespread use of carbon-emitting cars (Statistics Canada reported recently that only *thirteen percent* of Winnipeggers use public transit)

and political pressure intensifies, the potential for a massive, and much-needed, expansion of public transit grows. When City Council debates various rapid-transit plans, the discussion therefore needs to include strategies to deal with the poisonous atmosphere at Winnipeg Transit.

City Council, of course, is only part of the solution. Both Transit riders and workers want the same thing: high-quality public transit. While part of this goal needs to be accomplished by Council ensuring Transit management treat its employees better, there also needs to be a better relationship between the riders and workers. One form this could take would be a public-transit riders' organization (like the Bus Riders Unions in Los Angeles and Vancouver) working with Transit workers on a campaign to reduce fares and increase funding and service.

The next decade will, hopefully, see public transportation in Winnipeg take on its rightful role as a major part of the Winnipeg transportation network. Regardless of what form that takes, both riders and non-riders need to recognize the wisdom in supporting the people who bring us this increasingly important service. As long as management fails to see the connection between contented employees and a high-quality service, Winnipeg will continue to suffer from an insufficient public-transit network.

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