

The bus stops here for First Transit contract

By Peter Dreier

THE 55 bus drivers who serve the seniors citizens, students, disabled people and others who ride Pasadena's ARTS Bus and Dial-a-Ride service hope they don't have to spend the holiday season on picket lines instead of with their families.

The city of Pasadena contracts out these bus services to a British-based corporation, First Transit, that has so disrespected the bus drivers that they are on the verge of going on strike. The drivers, concerned about the well-being of their riders as well as their working conditions, would like to avert a strike.

About 1.7 million riders used the six ARTS bus lines last year. About 200 riders use the Dial-a-Ride on a regular basis; it primarily serves senior citizens, and extends to Altadena and San Marino. Riders pay 50 cents for each ride.

The drivers, who are represented by Teamsters union Local 848, are fed up with First Transit. They want the Pasadena City Council to find another transportation firm to manage the bus

service. There are a number of other companies in the area with the experience to run the ARTS and Dial-a-Ride bus lines in a more responsible manner. The city owns the buses. First Transit simply hires the drivers and leases and maintains the buses.

Under the city's contract with First Transit, it can break its agreement with the company for any reason with 90 days notice.

What are the drivers' concerns? The drivers are concerned about safety issues, wages, health insurance and disrespect from their employer.

First Transit has a history of safety violations and poor labor relations. According to the union, recently one bus operator was almost run over by his own bus when the emergency brake on the bus gave out and the bus began to roll. Also, union officials said that earlier this year, First Transit operators in Pasadena had to drive buses for at least a week that were blowing smoke inside and out of the bus. Drivers were coughing, felt sick and complained to their supervisor.

The company has refused the union's request to put language

in the contract that says, "The company recognizes that bus operators have the right to refuse unsafe equipment," a clause that is already in First Transit's union contract for the DASH bus in LA.

Pay is another key issue. For example, Camilla Butler has worked as a Dial-a-Ride driver for nine years and only makes \$12.03 per hour. Jerry Harvell has been an ARTS bus driver for eight years and earns only \$11.82 per hour.

The starting pay for First Transit's ARTS bus drivers is only \$9.25 an hour, compared with a \$10.71 average starting pay for other bus drivers in the area.

The average pay for the ARTS bus drivers is only \$10.46, compared with \$13.72 for other drivers in the area. In fact, 33 of the 55 drivers earn less than the city's living wage law — \$11.01 per hour for employees without health insurance. (The law exempts employees with a union contract, based on the assumption that they will earn more than the living wage level).

The top wage for an ARTS bus driver is only \$13.01 an hour. For

a 40-hour week, that's only \$520 a week, or \$27,040 a year. This is \$2 per hour less than the average top wage rate for other bus drivers in the area.

Only one of the 55 bus drivers makes the top wage. Other bus companies in the area regularly raise the pay of drivers based on their experience; more than half of bus drivers for those companies have reached the top wage. In contrast, First Transit refuses to adopt a wage scale that will put drivers at top wage after a certain number of years. Not surprisingly, the turnover among First Transit's Pasadena drivers is very high. The result is that there are many new and inexperienced drivers, which is not good for the passengers and public safety.

Despite the rising cost of housing, health care and almost everything else, First Transit has refused to provide any wage increase in the beginning of the new contract to 23 of the 55 drivers.

First Transit doesn't provide its drivers with an affordable health insurance plan. The company's bare-bones health plan costs the drivers \$90 to \$300 a

month. At least half of the drivers cannot afford these premiums. As a result, they have to go without health insurance at all for themselves or their children.

First Transit has also refused to provide the drivers with any contribution to a retirement fund. The other bus companies in the area provide drivers with a retirement plan. In fact, First Transit provides the drivers of its Foothill Transit service in Pomona a 401K plan with matching funds. Drivers for the city of L.A.'s DASH bus service have a pension retirement plan, too.

To rub salt in the drivers' wounds, First Transit even refused to provide its own drivers with parking spaces for their cars at its main facility. So, while they are driving the city buses, many end up getting parking tickets from the city of Pasadena.

Who is First Transit? It is a subsidiary of the British-based company, First Group, which has revenues of over \$4 billion a year. First Transit operates in 235 communities in 45 states. First Group recently purchased Laidlaw International, which is best known in the U.S. for its

school bus services. First Group is the U.K.'s largest bus operator with a fleet of more than 9,000 vehicles, 50,000 employees worldwide and is also one of the U.K.'s leading train operators.

Last year, 50 drivers for the L.A. DASH bus service in the San Fernando Valley went on strike for six months. Eventually the city settled the strike by ending its contract with First Transit and awarded the contract to another bus company, Pasadena officials need to do the same thing to avert a strike and a disruption of service for the passengers who depend on the Dial-a-Ride and ARTS buses.

The Pasadena bus drivers do not want to disrupt the lives of their riders. But they cannot be expected to work under the conditions that First Transit imposes. So it is now up to the mayor and City Council to intervene, terminate the contract with First Transit, and replace it with a company that respects the drivers, the riders and the community.

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