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America's Largest Transit Worker Unions Vow "Aggressive Action" If Transit Systems Don't Protect Frontline Workers

We are not cannon fodder. Dying is no way to make a living.

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WASHINGTON, DC: Two unions representing the overwhelming majority of U.S. transit workers who operate bus, subway, and streetcar systems are jointly vowing to take "aggressive action" if system operators don't better protect their workers from COVID-19.

The Transport Workers Union of America (TWU) and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) have entered into an historic agreement to work collectively to put maximum pressure on transit agencies that are failing to take protective measures to safeguard transit workers, including the provision of masks and gloves.

The two unions represent more than 330,000 workers in the United States, and their members include bus operators, train operators, conductors, trackworkers, car cleaners, mechanics, and other frontline transit workers. These employees operate and maintain nearly every transit system in America, including: New York; Washington, D.C.; Chicago; Boston; Philadelphia; San Francisco; Atlanta; Miami; Houston; Dallas; Columbus, Ohio; and Detroit.

"If transit agencies don't take immediate and dramatic steps to protect our members, there will be serious consequences," TWU International President John Samuelson said. "We will not sit back and let transit workers be treated like cannon fodder in this war against the coronavirus. We can—and will—take aggressive action."

Amalgamated Transit Union International President John Costa said: "Too many transit agencies are not providing personal protective equipment for their employees, endangering the lives of our members and the families they go home to. It is beyond shameful that those tasked with overseeing these agencies during this crisis have allowed us to arrive at this juncture! We are prepared to take whatever aggressive action is necessary in order to protect our members and their families. Nothing is off the table. Dying is no way to make a living."

Transit workers are the pipeline delivering essential service personnel to work during this crisis and back home to their families. America cannot properly fight COVID-19 without transit workers. The government must ensure they are properly protected.

Hundreds of transit workers in more than 20 states have tested positive for the virus. New York City, where 10 transit workers have died, is the national epicenter today, but the virus continues to rapidly spread across the country. Line of duty fatalities among transit workers have also been confirmed in Detroit; New Orleans; Philadelphia; Boston, Washington, D.C.; Rocky Hill, Connecticut; and Everett, Washington.

The unions say their members are reporting overcrowded buses and work locations, which violate social distancing guidelines. Members have raised alarms that they are driving exposed and therefore endangering other essential workers—such as hospital staff and retail and grocery workers—who use transit to get to the frontlines. “We are working in, and they’re being brought to work in, 40-foot petri dishes with absolutely no protective equipment,” Costa said.

ATU and TWU Demands

The union leaders also said transit agencies should:

- Provide gloves and masks to transit workers;
- Regularly disinfect buses, trains, streetcars, and worker facilities, including crew rooms;
- Enforce rear-door boarding to maintain a safe distance between riders and bus operators;
- Suspend use of any timekeeping systems that require multiple workers to touch the same digital screen, keyboard, or fingerprint-scanning device;
- Begin systematically cleaning and sanitizing equipment and facilities;
- Urge riders to cover their faces with a bandana or scarf if they are not wearing masks while riding mass transit;
- Mandate social distancing among transit riders using their systems, as well as workers in crew rooms and other worker facilities;
- Provide in the line of duty death benefits for employees; and
- Agree to ‘pandemic leave’ policies that ensure no one potentially exposed to Covid-19 is compelled to report to work to retain employment.

These conditions will help create safer environments for transit workers, who provide a service that goes beyond critical. These workers also have families who depend on them and their continued health and well-being. With this in mind, the unions don’t just request that system operators improve conditions to protect workers and improve safety conditions — they demand it.