

VTA DRIVERS STRIKE: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

UPDATED AS OF JULY 12, 2019



1. Who are the parties involved in this dispute?

- Martha's Vineyard Transit Authority (VTA), a public agency funded by taxpayers.
- VTA bus drivers, who are members of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1548.
- Transit Connection, Inc. (TCI), a Florida-based company owned by Edward Pigman that was hired by VTA to manage daily operations.

2. Why are my VTA drivers on strike?

VTA drivers have sought union representation for more than 16 years. The latest chapter in this struggle started in 2015. Driven by concerns about bus safety, a severe driver shortage, dangerous reliance on overtime, wage stagnation, unaffordable benefits (\$2000/month for family plan in TCI's last offer), and abusive management by TCI and VTA Administrator Angela Grant, the drivers voted to join ATU.

TCI fought the union election and refused for years to recognize the union. Finally, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that TCI was violating federal labor law by "failing and refusing to recognize and bargain with" ATU Local 1548. TCI still refused to negotiate and even sued the NLRB. Finally, the 11th Circuit Court ordered TCI to begin negotiations with the union. VTA paid for all of TCI's legal bills, costing Vineyard taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars.

Negotiations finally began in 2018. For nearly a year, TCI intentionally obstructed the process by hiring an expensive anti-union consultant and submitting ludicrous proposals, like demanding that TCI have the right to cancel the contract at any time. The company has refused to accept union wage proposals intended to bring VTA drivers up to par with drivers in other area transit agencies. VTA drivers haven't had a raise of any kind in five years. They are the lowest paid transit workers in the region, despite the higher cost of living on the island.

Earlier this year, a federal mediator was brought in at the bus drivers' request to help the parties more constructively negotiate. Unfortunately, TCI abandoned the negotiations process altogether in June and has refused to return to the bargaining table since. This left the drivers no choice but to initiate a strike.

3. What are they asking for in their contract?

The drivers want a fair contract. Since the start, the provisions of it have been negotiable, with drivers requesting a wage increase, affordable family healthcare plan, safety program, and standard contract provisions like just cause employment, wage progression, and seniority-based assignments.

4. Why is the strike happening right now, and why are the buses still running?

TCI's decision to walk away from the table in June left drivers no choice but to call a strike. Since the strike began, TCI, with the approval of the VTA, has hired replacement drivers from across the country. They pay for their transportation to/from their home states, for their lodging and food here on the island, and at wage rates higher than those earned by VTA drivers.

5. What's the latest on negotiations?

Despite the best efforts of the federal mediator, TCI still refuses to come to the Vineyard to negotiate. The union has offered to end the strike and have the dispute settled by a neutral arbitrator. VTA and TCI refused. It is clear that both Administrator Grant and TCI are more interested in breaking the union at any cost than in reaching a fair agreement.

6. Who has the power to provide what they need?

TCI works on behalf of the VTA. VTA Administrator Angela Grant has the power to compel TCI to return to the bargaining table or cancel their agreement if the company refuses. Instead, Grant has taken the unprecedented step of involving herself directly in negotiations on the company's behalf and releasing false statements to the public about the drivers and their motivations.

Administrator Grant is appointed – and can be fired – by the VTA Advisory Board. The VTA Board is made up of eight people, one appointed by each town on the island and two seats reserved for community and disability advocates. The Board has refused to fill the advocacy seats for years, meaning there were six Board members. This week, the Edgartown rep resigned, leaving only five seats filled.

For years, Board Chair Alice Butler (Oak Bluffs) has abdicated her responsibilities as chair to Administrator Grant. An unelected public official, Grant has used the freedom granted to her by an absentee board to award TCI's contract prior to board review, to give herself substantial salary increases, and to fund the union-busting efforts of TCI at taxpayer expense.

7. Why isn't the VTA Board taking charge of the situation?

While there are some Board Members who want the Board to function better, including at least one who has called for the State to conduct a forensic audit of the VTA, Administrator Grant has managed to seize control of the very Board meant to hold her accountable.

The Board hasn't met since the strike began. It often fails to have a quorum at its meetings. When it does meet, active Board members report that Grant withholds documents and information and that a majority of members appear disinterested in exercising any oversight authority.

8. Who can fix this?

The Selectmen in each town are responsible for appointing and overseeing VTA Board members. Unfortunately, most of them have shown no interest in resolving the situation, despite multiple news reports over the past year, several appearances by VTA drivers at Selectmen meetings, and several individual meetings between drivers and Selectmen.

The Selectmen can fill the vacant board seats with interested and qualified individuals, demand that the entire VTA Board engage in effective oversight of the agency's finances, request a forensic and legal audit, and demand that a contract be settled and bus service fully restored thereafter.

9. What can I do to help?

- Call your Selectmen today and demand that they treat the crisis at VTA as an emergency.
- Tell your employers and community institutions how difficult it is to meet your obligations while the strike continues, and ask them to contact their Selectmen, too.
- Join us on the picket line.
- Contribute to the VTA Drivers Strike Fund at bit.ly/vtastrikefund.
- Follow us on Facebook for updates: facebook.com/supportvineyardbusdrivers
- Use alternate forms of transportation and avoid crossing the picket line to ride a bus.

