

# AMALGAMATED TRANSIT UNION LOCAL 689

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## Statement of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 689

SB61 – Maryland Transit Administration - Conversion to Zero-Emission Buses (Zero-Emission Bus Transition Act Revisions)  
February 11th, 2022

**TO: The Honorable Paul G. Pinsky and Members of the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee**

**FROM: Brian Wivell, Political & Communications Director, ATU Local 689**

ATU Local 689 strongly supports SB61 – Maryland Transit Administration - Conversion to Zero-Emission Buses (Zero-Emission Bus Transition Act Revisions) and urges the committee to issue a favorable report.

For our written testimony, we have copied a forthcoming essay from our President Raymond Jackson on the issue of fleet electrification. We believe that SB61 perfectly promotes the pro-worker, pro-public transit, and pro-environment principles that we fought for in this piece.

### *Right on Schedule: The Need for Zero-Emissions Vehicle Apprenticeships*

“Few things are as rare in public transportation as riders, management, and labor unions all moving in the same direction on an issue. With the potential passage of massive federal infrastructure proposals, a new consensus will be clear: we must electrify America’s bus fleet. A rapid federally funded transition to zero emissions vehicles could make diesel buses go the way of the horse-drawn streetcar in less than twenty years. But in the debate over the speed or methods of America’s transition to electric or fuel cell buses, we might miss another opportunity that comes with any major industry-wide transformation. We have a once-in-a-generation moment to train America’s diesel bus maintenance workforce on zero emissions vehicles (ZEV) using one of the oldest, most worker-friendly, and proven labor training systems out there: joint labor-management apprenticeships.

When talking about apprenticeships, most people outside of the labor movement or blue-collar workforce imagine an indentured medieval blacksmith or hard-hat construction jobs in the skilled trades. These assumptions limit the massive potential that apprenticeships have for being a labor-friendly workforce training option for an economy that will be forced to change rapidly to decrease its dependence on fossil fuels.

Transitioning America’s public transportation network to zero-emissions vehicles creates a [substantial problem for the existing transit workforce](#). There simply aren’t enough trained bus mechanics familiar with the new technology to support a fully electric bus fleet. According to the [Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), there were 281,300 diesel service technicians and mechanics in 2019. The [Transportation Trades Department](#) of the AFL-CIO estimates that the median age of a public transit worker is 52 years old, a full decade older than the [nationwide median for workers](#). This tells us that within the next 20 years, we’ll likely see nearly 50% turnover in the public transit workforce from retirement alone. Not to mention that diesel bus mechanics are some of the very people that are most directly negatively impacted by the inhalation of dangerous bus fumes. We owe it to diesel bus mechanics to provide retraining on new zero-emissions vehicle technology.

Many transit agencies have avoided directly dealing with this question by signing extended warranties and long, exclusive maintenance [contracts directly with manufacturers](#) as part of the electric vehicle procurement process. Many ZEV manufacturers hope to restructure the entire labor market for bus maintenance. Instead of just buying

a bus from the manufacturer and then having your own in-house maintenance workers take care of it, many vendors offer 10-12 year warranties that require almost all maintenance to be conducted by the manufacturer itself. Some companies won't even provide diagnostic codes for maintenance workers to be able to find out what is wrong with their buses. Others refuse to offer training to transit authorities so workers will even know what they're repairing. These aren't just misunderstandings between transit authorities and vendors. These manufacturers view this as a more sustainable business model that will eventually shift unpredictable sales revenue into long term maintenance contracts. This threatens the independence and self-reliance of transit systems across the country. If we don't take important steps prior to electrification, our transit systems may become completely dependent on manufacturers for even the most routine maintenance activities.

This directly threatens the livelihoods of thousands of unionized public transit maintenance workers across the country. [Existing federal transportation law has labor protections](#) that prevent federal funding from being used to undermine the existing labor conditions of organized transit workers. Transit agencies may risk their access to federal funding for fleet transitions if they continue down the path towards outsourcing bus maintenance jobs. American transit agencies must develop plans for how they can retrain their existing bus maintenance workers for the fleets of the future.

Luckily there is another way that we can develop the workforce we need, while preserving good union jobs and eliminating a massive source of greenhouse gas emissions. Time tested and proven union apprenticeship programs are an opportunity to train the workforce we need, expand the labor movement, and turn bus maintenance jobs into an attractive career option for young workers.

A union apprenticeship is a simple concept. Instead of requiring workers to develop their skills on their own time and rack up student loan debt in the process, a union apprenticeship is a job where you “earn while you learn.” You develop your skills as you progress through practical on-the-job training programs. Apprentices aren't just thrown out into the workforce and told to figure it out for themselves, instead they're trained under the guidance of skilled journeymen and teachers to develop their craft in the environment that they'll be working in. These apprenticeships are often called “joint labor-management” apprenticeships specifically because both labor and management have an equal say over the training programs, including everything from necessary hours, certification standards, down to curriculum design.

Employers are often hesitant to take on their own training programs, citing high turnover as their reason. Why train employees that won't stick around? This is often a thinly veiled way to shift the costs of employee training onto workers themselves. Why pay to train employees when you can just hire those with prior experience? But this is impossible when the workforce you need doesn't even exist yet.

Evidence clearly shows that apprenticeships are an easy and effective way to increase retention while customizing training specifically for the needs of the employer. The [National Association for Building Trades Unions \(NABTU\) reports](#) that employees hired through an apprenticeship will stay at a business longer, with over “91% of apprentices that complete an apprenticeship are still employed 9 months later.” An apprenticeship is often the difference between working at just another job and a career.

Zero emissions bus maintenance apprenticeships aren't hypothetical, but a likely future direction for the industry. Funding is already available from both the state and federal government to facilitate apprenticeships that could be used for programs like this. This doesn't even take into consideration the [massive amounts of federal money](#) that may be available from the Infrastructure Bill & Reconciliation Budget over the coming years. These could make apprenticeships financially impossible for agencies to ignore. The [Federal Transit Administration recently partnered](#) with the International Transportation Learning Center to help, “...address the transit worker shortage by providing resources to re-skill and up-skill our workforce and will facilitate the green technology initiatives many transit agencies are undertaking.”

Zero emissions vehicle apprenticeships would also create a sustainable infrastructure for future climate friendly technology rollouts. A transition from battery electric buses to hydrogen fuel cells or any other new technology would no longer require starting from scratch. Transit agencies would just need to update their curriculum requirements for their apprenticeship programs.

Labor-management apprenticeship programs in the transit sector would also bring more people into the labor movement. Skyrocketing inequality and a global pandemic have [reminded people about the importance of labor unions](#) in fighting for the working class. With a union, workers actually have an organized voice on the job. ATU Local 689 has over 100 years of experience fighting for social justice in and around the nation's capital. We transformed transit from a hyper-exploitative industry where companies cared more about the horses than the streetcar operators, to one where our members can help raise a family and plan for retirement. Our members [fought to desegregate transit](#), [rallied against South African apartheid](#), and [for civil rights](#). We're proud to be an economic engine of the black middle class of the DMV. Public transit in this region might still be under private ownership were it not for the [series of strikes held by our members](#) against the greedy O. Roy Chalk and Louis Wolfson, former owners of DC Transit and Capital Transit Company respectively.

But our work isn't done. Not even close. Many of our members are underpaid and overworked by the private contractors that have carved away pieces of WMATA. These private companies don't exist to provide transit services for riders. [They exist to make profits](#). That's why we're proud to be part of the environmental movement. Our proposed path forward with ZEV apprenticeships has the potential to further solidify connections between the environmental and labor movements. The American environmental movement has a long history of clashes with labor unions over the perception that it views workers' concerns as secondary. Promises of "just transitions" that replaced family-sustaining careers with union wages into unorganized low-paying service sector jobs made many working people view the environmental movement as a threat. But this couldn't be further from the truth, especially for us in the transit industry. We understand our role in the fight against climate change and the need to expand public transit. Both labor and environmentalists share a common goal, a liveable planet.

But now we have an easy opportunity to provide a bona fide "just transition" in our own backyards. There are thousands of maintenance workers whose jobs are at stake. It's on the environmental movement to respond. Anyone championing bus fleet electrification without championing apprenticeships is not really focused on equity in transit. The time for apprenticeships is now. Right on schedule."