

**Statement of John Lyons, Director of Joint Industry Councils and Collective Bargaining  
Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU)**

**SB 491**

**Senate Education, Energy, and Environment Committee**

**February 22, 2023**

The Amalgamated Transit Union, representing over 200,000 transit and allied workers in the U.S. and Canada, including about 150 school bus operators in Charles County, MD, strongly support the passage of SB 491.

School bus drivers and attendants in Charles County organized with ATU to bargain for better wages and working conditions. Student Transportation Employees nationwide must undergo special training and refresher courses semi-annually. They must pass fingerprinting and background checks. CDL Operators must obtain a special endorsement on their licenses in order to perform this service. Despite all these extra qualifications, these jobs remain some of the lowest compensated transit positions in the state of Maryland. These employees wanted to serve students in the communities they live in. School Bus Operators and Attendants carry and care for our states most precious cargo yet are compensated far below their value.

While the shortage of qualified CDL Operators is a national crisis. One need look no further than Anne Arundel, Harford, Prince Georges or any other county in Maryland to see impact of the shortages. Despite efforts to remedy the issues, they have still fallen far short of being able to solve the problem. More needs to be done. In Charles County, SB491 takes this crucial step.

Our members work at 9 of the 18 private school bus contractors that serve the Charles County Public School system, many of whom are smaller, owner-operated bus companies. Several have expressed to the union that they are in debt from the purchase of the school bus vehicles that they themselves drive, and therefore must continue to operate.

As the Collective Bargaining Director for the ATU, I want to make clear that this is a unique situation from that which we usually see in this industry. Most jurisdictions where the ATU operates have only a few contractors who tend to be larger multistate or multi-national operations with experience negotiating for wages and benefits with the school district.

The school bus contractors formed the Charles County School Bus Operators Association to represent them as they negotiate the salaries and benefits of ATU members – but have met with the County to do so without the operators’ or their union’s input.

This bill seeks to create a more transparent environment for these negotiations which have a direct impact on the wages ATU members earn and whether they are able to support their families. It allows the legal bargaining agent for the drivers to participate in the negotiations over members wages and benefits with both the Contractors Association and the School District.

If this bill is not passed, it will condemn Charles County school bus operators who perform a vital service for students in Maryland to jobs that pay pitiful wages and do not match the standards across the region. These workers deserve a seat at the table and a livable wage and SB 491 is the best way to ensure this happens.

We urge this committee to pass SB 491 and look forward to collaborating with the local government and contractors to create living wage transit jobs in Charles County.