

STREETSBLOG

CTA bus driver alleges he was disciplined for organizing against transporting police

By Alyssa Iovinelli | Jun 9, 2020 | 4 COMMENTS



Police officers used the Humboldt Park Boathouse parking lot as a staging area during protests on Sunday. Officers with no face masks were seen entering and exiting a bus staffed by a CTA operator. Photo: Alyssa Iovinelli

A CTA bus driver alleges that the transit agency violated labor laws and employees' First Amendment rights by breaking up meetings where bus operators discussed safety and ethical concerns about the CTA fleet being used to transport police during the George Floyd protests, as well as disciplining him for his role in the discussions.



Yesterday bus driver Erek Slater [held a press conference](#) and “front-line worker speak-out” ... Federal Plaza at Adams and Dearborn to announce “legal charges against the Chicago Transit Authority for breaking workers’... rights to freedom of speech.” Slater was joined by fellow union workers and representatives, with a turnout of more than 100 people.

At the event Slater said he has driven buses for CTA for 14 years, is an executive member of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 241, and is the peer-elected shop steward at the North Park CTA bus garage. [His lawsuit states](#) that on May 31st at a picnic table outside of the garage, he and coworkers discussed an [ATU international statement](#) regarding Floyd’s murder. The suit alleges that CTA management accused Slater of promoting a [wildcat strike](#) and threatened to call the police to disband the meeting. Three days later, the lawsuit states, CTA management issued him a “behavioral violation notice” and had Chicago police escort him from the garage premises. The lawsuit states that Slater has not been permitted to return to work since that incident.





Slater at the press conference. Photo: Alyssa Iovanelli

During the press conference Slater's Lawyer Nicholas Kreitman provided more info on the suit. He argued that CTA working conditions during the pandemic have constituted [OSHA](#) violations, because they have put workers at risk of contracting COVID-19, and said that risk was increased by the requirement to transport [police officers who often do not wear masks](#) and are interacting closely with the public [without practicing social distancing](#).

The lawsuit alleges that the CTA has violated the [Illinois Public Labor Relations Act](#) and workers' First Amendment rights by limiting what they can talk about during their break periods. "We are seeking a temporary restraining order to stop the CTA's actions prohibiting these discussions amongst bus operators [about workplace safety]," Kreitman said. "We are also here to stop the recent violation notice that was issued to Erek Slater for discussions... with other bus operators."

Kreitman alleged that the CTA is participating in a "campaign of retaliation" against Slater, pointing to CTA personnel parked on Dearborn recording the event on cell phones, whom he argued were "trying to intimidate workers attending this demonstration."

During the event, Slater criticized the CTA for their response to worker safety concerns about COVID-19, revealing that he contracted COVID-19 in April. He praised bus drivers in Minneapolis and [New York City](#) who refused to transport police to protests or bring protestors to jail. And he questioned [the decision to suspend Chicago transit service](#) at night during the unrest.



“CTA shut down public transit when protesters against the racist murder of George Floyd had already taken public transit into downtown demonstrations,” Slater said. “Then a curfew order was put out about half an hour before 9pm. Many non-violent protesters were now breaking the law only because they had no way to get home.”

“We are in the middle of a pandemic and medical workers have to use public transit to get to work,” Slater added. “We were told that we couldn’t shut down public transit for even a few hours overnight like NYC did to make sure it was properly disinfected of the coronavirus and slow the transmission of the virus to the public, especially to transit workers and our families.” ([The New York transit shutdowns](#) have been criticized as a strategy to clear unhoused people from the system.)

“Now public transit is shut down because of legitimate protest against state violence?” Slater said. “Is using CTA buses to block protests a legitimate use of public transit? Is driving National Guard and police to scenes of physical conflict safe for public transit workers?”

Slater and other speakers called on organized labor to find common ground between their workplace safety issues and the concerns of those protesting police brutality. They urged workers to join in protests, citing organized labor’s historic place in social justice movements, including the struggle for Black liberation.





Martese Chism. Photo: Alyssa Iovinelli

Martese Chism, a nurse who is on the board of the National Nurses Organization Committee and the great-granddaughter of a civil rights activist who was lynched, addressed the crowd. “CTA and the city of Chicago are so afraid of what [Black Lives Matter] means, that they are firing workers who question whether they want to be complicit in the suppression of this movement... We demand the city of Chicago to stand on the right side of history. We can’t breathe until CTA takes their knees off the fired CTA workers’ necks”.

Chicago Teachers Union representative Ed Hershey, a science teacher at Lindbloom High School, noted that the last time CTA workers held a wildcat strike was in the summer of 1968, the same year as [the unrest following the assassination](#) of Martin Luther King Jr., and the Chicago police crackdown on anti-war protesters at the Democratic National Convention. He argued that CTA management also sees the connection between that era and current social movements now and “are afraid other working people may wake up and follow the young people who are protesting the racist murder of George Floyd.”

International Alliance of Stage Engineers member Tanner Masseth also referenced King as he discussed the connections between labor movements and racial justice struggles, noting that the reverend was assassinated while supporting striking sanitation workers in Memphis.



Miles Warren Jr. Photo: Alyssa Iovinelli

Miles Warren Jr., a worker at a Ford Motors plant, alleged that at his factory, workers' concerns about COVID-19 are not being addressed, arguing that Ford, the CTA, and other union workplaces are putting workers' lives in danger.

Joe Balkis, a retired UPS worker and member of the Teamsters Local 705 union, echoed sentiments that, despite having their own union, police are not on the side of organized labor. He noted that Philando Castile, a school cafeteria worker who was killed police in Minnesota in 2016, and Frank Ordonez, a UPS driver who was fatally shot by police in Florida in 2019 after he was taken hostage by jewelry store robbers, were union members. "The police shouldn't have a union. They don't deserve a union... Now is not the time for half measures. People are talking about defunding the police — we need to abolish the police."



AFL-CIO needs to kick them out,” he said, to which the crowd erupted in cheers.



Slater and other speakers also argued that police funding should instead go towards education, healthcare, housing, and public transportation.

The crowd joined speakers in chants, like “16 shots and a cover up!” referring to Laquan McDonald, killed by Chicago Police in 2014, “Justice for George Floyd,” and “Defund the Police.” At several points, CTA bus operators driving past the event honked their horns and cheered.



The march to the CTA headquarters. Photo: Alyssa Iovinelli

At the end of the press conference, Slater invited attendees to march peacefully to the CTA headquarters at 567 W Lake St to deliver a copy of his lawsuit. About 30 Chicago Police Officers who were monitoring the event on bicycles and in cars traveled alongside the march, restricting participants to the sidewalk and assisting in blocking off car traffic. The marchers chanted “quit your job” at police officers, “Say his name: George Floyd,” “Say her name, Breonna Taylor,” “This is what democracy looks like,” and the anti-cop slang “F—12!” There were no physical conflicts between the marchers and police.



At CTA headquarters, Slater's attorney Kreitman entered the building, which was closed to the public, later returning to report that he had dropped off a copy of the lawsuit. "Hopeful we are going to put enough pressure through doing actions like these to get [the CTA] to reverse [their disciplinary actions] without having to go before a federal judge, but we are prepared to do so," Kreitman said.



Kreitman returns from delivering the lawsuit to CTA management. Photo: Alyssa Iovinelli

Slater concluded the event by tentatively inviting attendees to gather on Thursday, June 11th at 8:00 a.m. at the North Park CTA garage at 3112 W. Foster Ave. prior to his 9:00 a.m. disciplinary hearing with CTA management. He proposed a "peaceful, non-violent, loud [demonstration], making it clear to management that this is not just the fight of a few people."

Asked for a comment on Slater's lawsuit, a CTA spokesperson said, "CTA does not comment on any pending litigation. CTA respects and upholds the rights of our employees to exercise their First Amendment rights." In response to a question about the use of CTA buses to transport police, the spokesperson said, "CTA routinely provides its buses for use at the



request of city of Chicago public safety agencies. We have a long history of providing buses for special events and large-scale gatherings, both planned and unplanned.” They mentioned the 2012 protests against a NATO conference in Chicago as an example of a similar scenario.



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Candidates Weigh in on Solution for Improving the CTA at the Transit 4 All Forum

By Lynda Lopez | Jan 29, 2019

Participants included Gery Chico, LaShawn Ford, Susana Mendoza, Toni Preckwinkle, Paul Vallas, and Willie Wilson.



Having police crack down on minor transit infractions doesn't make us safer



By John Greenfield | Mar 11, 2020

Today transit worker union reps and community organizations called for non-police solutions to reducing crime on the CTA.



Lightfoot says crimes committed on CTA and Divvy motivated shutdowns

By John Greenfield | Jun 2, 2020

Lightfoot: "I can't ignore the circumstances on the ground, and how these seemingly benign resources are being used to further criminal conduct."

Life in the Fast Lane: Shuttles Are Still Illegally Using the Loop Link Route

By John Greenfield | Mar 3, 2016

Private bus lines in the Loop Link bus rapid transit lanes is definitely a thing. Last week I posted footage of the red lanes, clearly marked "CTA Bus Only," being used by Aon / Prudential Center shuttle buses, as well as shuttles operated by The Free Enterprise System. A Streetsblog Chicago reader who wished to [...]





Chicago Transit Needs an Upgrade: 5 Universal Features of European City Transit

By Steven Vance | Jan 23, 2017

This isn't a wish list. These are five standard features of most bus networks in Europe.




Local Rocker Andy Slater Discusses What It's Like Riding the CTA as a Blind Person

By John Greenfield | Apr 14, 2017

Visually impaired sound artist, rock musician, and recording engineer Andy Slater offered to share his experiences navigating the city on public transportation and floated some ideas to improve transportation access for folks with disabilities.



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OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS **TRPCLRMNTCST** • 22 days ago

Goes to show how deeply entrenched the "Culture of Silence" is. The only additional funding for anything in the past two decades has been for the fortification of the police/jail state.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**david vartanoff** • 22 days ago

Shame on CTA!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Daniel Joseph** • 22 days ago

Is EreK Slater's union, ATU Local #241, providing him with guidance and consul?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Dorris Zollar** → Daniel Joseph • 20 days ago

Probably not ...the union president Keith Hill is a shill for the CTA .Local 241 is a shell of its former self and has been plagued with allegations of theft and malfeasance.....Just last year prior to the locals election \$120,000 was stolen from union dues.

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