Even if you're not from the Bay Area, you've probably heard about the labor troubles at the Bay Area Rapid Transit system (BART) – the rail system that is one of the largest public transit providers here in the Bay Area in terms of passengers. Hundreds of thousands of commuters use the BART system on a daily basis. But twice this year, those commuters had to find alternative routes to work because of strikes by the unions that operate the BART system.

Those strikes have prompted a backlash, even in the union-friendly Bay Area and California. A recent poll found that for the first time a plurality of Californians stated that unions did more harm than good. A majority of Bay Area residents in the same poll supported a ban on strikes by public transit employees. Board members of BART are now pushing for such a strike ban, as is the leading Republican in the State Senate.

There are a lot of issues that such a proposal brings up, but I want to focus on the environmental ones here. It seems clear that transit strikes have negative environmental impacts. First, during a strike more individuals will drive, simply because transit options they rely upon are no longer available. That means more congestion and more air pollution. But I think more important are the long-term impacts of a strike on the use of public transit by commuters. Reliability is one of the most important factors determining whether people will use a transit system. If they can't count on the system, many people won't use it. (Here is a recent study by Berkeley graduate students on the issue, with some related news coverage.) Reliability may be particularly important when people make major investment and lifestyle decisions. For instance, someone may be considering whether to buy or rent a residence in an area with minimal parking but excellent public transit service. Will that person make the commitment to an urban residential environment (including giving up their car) if they are not certain that transit service is reliable and regular? Lack of trust in the reliability of a public transit system may lead people to choose residential options that are more auto-dependent. The result may be increased greenhouse gas emissions, increased air pollution, and increased pressure for development in remote exurban areas that destroys important habitat for native species and ecosystems.

There is another way that transit strikes can reduce usage of public transit systems. A lot of the day-to-day behavior for individuals, behavior such as daily commuting, is determined by habits. But habits can be broken – particularly when there is a major disruption that forces people to adjust their daily patterns. Ideally riding public transit is the kind of habit that we want to encourage for commuters,

instead of driving by car.  But a transit strike can be just the kind of major disruption that breaks the public transit habit, and instills a new habit of driving by car.

I want to be clear that a ban on transit strikes is not necessarily a step that could or should empower management over unions.  One could imagine a range of other options to resolve labor disputes – for instance, binding arbitration to resolve contract negotiation disputes.  In fact, it's conceivable that binding arbitration might produce more favorable results to unions over the long-run than strikes.  (Here is an example of a labor-friendly web site supporting binding arbitration in New Hampshire.)

Other major cities that are known for their union sympathies – e.g., New York City and Chicago – prohibit transit strikes.  In fact, San Francisco's local public transit system (Muni) also prohibits transit strikes.  State lawmakers should seriously consider the proposal, at least if they're focused on the environmental impacts of transit strikes.