

New York City transit strike was quashed by the unions

By Bill Van Auken
24 December 2005

A group of top union officials in New York City played the key role in bringing about the abrupt end of the New York City transit strike, brokering a deal that leaves 34,000 subway and bus workers exposed to punishing financial penalties and the continued drive by their employer, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), to extract far-reaching concessions.

This was the first shutdown of the nation's largest mass transit system in 25 years. It expressed the enormous anger and willingness to sacrifice of this section of the working class, and demonstrated the immense social power it can wield. As a consequence, the strike won broad sympathy within the working population in New York City and beyond.

But among the official union leadership in the city, the walkout was viewed with hostility and fear. The union leaders were terrified that the transit workers' struggle could get out of control and touch off the social powder keg that exists in the financial center of world capitalism—a city dominated by the social chasm between an elite of Wall Street multimillionaires and millions of struggling and impoverished workers.

The labor bureaucrats' principal concern was that a successful strike by transit workers could inspire further eruptions of the class struggle. So they set out to sabotage and suppress the strike.

The *New York Times* spelled out the role played by the labor officialdom in an article published Friday, which carried the subhead, "The mayor and leaders of other unions were among those who helped get the two sides to bend." The *Times* reported that on Wednesday afternoon, a telephone conference call was organized between Roger Toussaint, president of Transport Workers Union Local 100, which represents the transit workers, and 40 leaders of other unions.

The *Times* wrote that "according to people who participated, Mr. Toussaint showed his frustration as he sought a public showing of support.

"'I don't need anyone standing on the sidelines holding my coat,' one person recalled him saying. 'I need someone to take off their coats.'"

But no such support was forthcoming. During the two and a half days that the transit workers walked the picket lines, shutting down bus and subway service, not a single official of another union in the city came forward to give even verbal support for the strike.

This was under conditions in which the full power of the government was being mobilized to crush the transit workers. The state obtained an injunction under the anti-labor Taylor Law providing that the workers be fined two days' pay for every day on the picket line. The financial losses from this penalty, combined with the loss of three days' pay, will mean a cut of approximately \$2,000 from the paycheck of the average transit worker. The injunction likewise provided for the jailing of top union officials, as well as, potentially, rank-and-file strikers themselves.

New York's billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg

sought to impose his own sanctions. After denouncing the strikers as "thuggish," he successfully argued in court for a \$1 million-a-day fine—to be doubled for each additional day on strike—against the union. When the walkout ended, the city was in court seeking \$25,000-a-day fines—also to be doubled daily—against each individual striker.

The corporate-controlled media went into overdrive in the attempt to whip up a lynch-mob atmosphere against the strikers, demanding that they be jailed and fired. Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* led the pack with diatribes that can only be described as fascistic.

On the last day of the strike, the *Post*, which had referred in a screaming front-page headline to the transit workers as "rats" the day before, and featured a picture of Toussaint with prison bars superimposed over his face on Thursday, published a column explicitly comparing the transit workers to the terrorists who flew planes into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

"The terrorists made it their mission to kill the economy," wrote *Post* columnist Andrea Peyser. "This brand of homegrown enemy pretends to have the city's interest at heart, while it takes aim at the most vulnerable workers."

Nothing could more clearly expose the real content of the US "global war on terrorism." It is directed at any impediment to the US banks and corporations reaping profits—whether at home or abroad. And it is creating conditions for outlawing the struggles of the American working class.

Through all this, the union officials in New York remained silent, not so much as issuing a leaflet defending the transit workers, much less calling a public demonstration or bringing their own members out on strike in solidarity action. Not a single union official stood up to utter the simple words, "I support the transit workers strike."

Their behavior was no different from that of the Transport Workers Union International, which publicly denounced the strike as illegal and unsanctioned, demanded that workers cross their own picket lines and scab, and sent its lawyers into court to argue on behalf of the city's position that the union was acting against the law.

Left without any support, Toussaint, according to the *Times* account, turned to two union bureaucrats—Bruce Raynor, the president of UNITE-HERE, and Mike Fishman, president of the building workers' union, Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ, who had both supported Bloomberg in his \$70 million campaign to buy a second term at City Hall—asking them to intercede with the mayor.

According to the newspaper, they convinced Bloomberg that Toussaint would help the MTA slash labor costs in health care and other areas if the authority would back away from its original demands for altering pensions for new-hires. Bloomberg apparently believed that enough could be taken out of transport workers' hides in this fashion to warrant accepting Toussaint's offer to call off the strike.

Nor were these the only union-connected protagonists in the deal. Acting on behalf of management was Barry Feinstein, a former Teamsters official who has held a seat on the MTA board since 1989. Feinstein briefly gained a reputation as a "militant" in the early 1970s when he ordered his members to raise the bridges leading into New

York, paralyzing traffic, to oppose demands for concessions. He was subsequently thrown out of the Teamsters by court order after being charged with embezzling half a million for his personal use.

The *Times* quoted the ex-bureaucrat turned millionaire as praising MTA chairman and billionaire real estate speculator Peter Kalikow for taking the hard line that provoked the strike.

“Many people thought that he wouldn’t be able to take the pressure, that he would fold, that he would do whatever had to be done to prevent a strike, that the MTA would avoid a strike at any cost,” Feinstein told the newspaper. “That didn’t happen.”

This then is the corrupt and reactionary lineup of current and former union officials who played the indispensable role in isolating and suppressing a strike that they opposed from the beginning.

But what about Toussaint? What did he expect when he called the strike? Apparently he harbored the utterly unfounded illusion that the other unions would come to his support, and that the Democratic politicians upon whom the TWU has lavished campaign contributions would provide the union with political cover. None of this happened, which was entirely predictable.

As for the result of the strike, the *Wall Street Journal* in its news pages offered a hardnosed assessment to its corporate readership. It wrote: “The fact that the Transport Workers Union Local 100 had to return to work without a contract or amnesty from massive fines showed the weakened hand of union officials.... The fight shows how employers are willing to confront unions to seek concessions in pension and health care benefits, risking damaging strikes. The challenges facing a weakened labor movement, which is suffering from declining membership and often receives ambivalent support for its battles, are stark.”

For the 34,000 transit workers who took part in the walkout, as well as for millions more workers who supported their struggle, the New York City transit strike has been a strategic experience of immense importance.

What the strike has exposed, above all, is that the unions are absolutely useless as instruments of social struggle. Their role is to straitjacket the working class and organize defeats.

Without an independent political alternative and a social and economic program opposed to the drive by Wall Street to smash down all impediments to profit and wealth accumulation, it is impossible to wage a successful struggle.

It is not merely a matter of transit workers confronting New York State’s Taylor Law and its proscription against public employee strikes. Any serious struggle by any section of workers today immediately comes into conflict with the government, the two-party system and the whole array of judicial and police power employed to defend the interests of corporate America.

Why was the rest of the union bureaucracy opposed to the transit

strike, and why was the Toussaint leadership of TWU Local 100 unwilling and unable to prosecute a successful struggle?

These are organizations that accept and defend the profit system. They collaborate with the employers to increase productivity at the expense of the workers, while subordinating their members politically to the ruling elite and its two-party system—principally through their support for the Democratic Party.

The assault on pensions and health care is being waged throughout the public and private sectors. The Bush administration is determined to dismantle Social Security and drastically curtail government-funded health benefits.

There is no questions that the social and class questions that emerged so powerfully in the transit workers’ strike will erupt again and again. Those like Bloomberg, Kalikow and their fellow billionaires and multimillionaires, who assume that they can continue using force and intimidation to suppress workers’ struggles and maintain the system of social inequality from which they have benefited, are mistaken.

They have profited immensely from the bankruptcy of the old trade union organizations of the working class, which have proven completely incapable of defending any of the gains won by past generations. But it is inevitable that new struggles by working people will arise, and, if armed politically, these struggles will be successful. Those who have enriched themselves through the steady destruction of the living standards and conditions of the working class majority in America and internationally will reap the whirlwind.

Only through a political struggle against big business as a whole and both of its parties—Democrats and Republicans alike—mobilizing the entire working class as an independent political force, can the basic interests of any section of workers be defended.

From the outset of the New York transit strike, the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* have sought to politically arm and prepare both transit workers and all those in New York and throughout the country who welcomed this renewal of social struggle in America.

It is now time to begin working through this experience politically. It is not viable to hope that one or another union will spontaneously make some kind of breakthrough. There is no way forward outside of the building of a new socialist leadership in the working class.

The central lesson of the transit strike is that the working class requires new forms of organization—above all, its own mass party to fight for social equality and the reorganization of economic life to meet the needs of the majority of the population, rather than to further the accumulation of vast personal fortunes.

This is what the Socialist Equality Party is fighting to achieve. For it to succeed, those who understand this need must make decisions and take action, above all by joining the SEP.

© World Socialist Web Site

To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit: <http://www.wsws.org>
