

New York City transit authority to employ welfare recipients

Allen Whyte

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The president of the New York City Transit Authority, Lawrence G. Reuther, has announced plans to utilize approximately 1,000 people on the Work Experience Program (WEP) to clean stations and trains. New York's WEP, which compels welfare recipients to perform civil service jobs for their benefits, is the largest program of its kind in the country. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority governing board is expected to give its approval to the proposal.

The introduction of workfare employees was made possible by the contract negotiated by Transport Workers Union Local 100 President Willie James two years ago. At that time Mayor Giuliani refused to allow WEP workers to work for transit. Now, according to Mr. Reuter, the NYCTA has reached 'an agreement in principle' with the mayor to begin using welfare recipients as cleaners.

The agreement negotiated at the end of 1996 specifically allows the Transit Authority to replace 500 civil service cleaners with WEP workers. The mayor originally objected to this contract language because, he said, it violated his agreement with the other city unions that welfare recipients would never be used to replace the jobs of city workers. It is now generally recognized that this was a ruse. Over the last number of years, thousands of union workers have been replaced by workfare employees forced to do the same work for the minimum wage, without benefits or the right to complain about working conditions.

In 1997 most of the city unions, including the TWU, endorsed the Republican mayor's successful reelection bid. Before it was able to do so, the largest city union, District Council 37, representing about 120,000 municipal workers in various job titles, negotiated a five-year contract that contained a two-year wage freeze. This 1997 contract agreement both insured labor

peace and made it possible for the leadership of various city unions to endorse Giuliani.

Recently, it has been uncovered that some top DC 37 leaders were involved in stuffing the ballot box with phony 'yes' votes to assure the passage of the agreement. A rejection by the membership would have thrown their relationship with Giuliani into crisis. Court proceedings have also revealed that the DC 37 leadership has been involved in widespread corruption and ties with organized crime.

The city unions have paved the way for thousands of workers in such city departments as the parks, sanitation and hospitals to be replaced by what many have denounced as slave labor. However, the president of TWU Local 100, Willie James, has welcomed the use of welfare recipients, saying, 'There will be light at the end of the tunnel for them.'

Transit authority management revealed its intention to employ workfare cleaners as part of a broader announcement on the use of a budgetary surplus. This involves the expansion of subway and bus service, which will require the hiring of 1,546 hourly employees. To help pay for this increased payroll, the authority has also announced plans to eliminate 396 managerial jobs, and to increase productivity. According to a TA spokesman, the latter would involve reorganizing the station department 'to eliminate redundancies,' improving bus maintenance productivity, as well as increasing employee availability. Although TA President Reuter has claimed this reorganization will be accomplished through the use of improved safety procedures, it had been earlier revealed that the TA has begun spying on and filming the whereabouts of workers who don't report to work due to illness.

The transit union leadership has welcomed the

increase in hiring with both open arms and open pockets. It has proposed that each new union member produced by this proposal be charged a \$100 'initiation fee' in addition to the regular dues that they will be charged every payday. This is particularly harsh on this layer of workers who, due to previous contract agreements, will be paid a mere minimum wage during their period of job training. TWU Local 100, which is itself top-heavy with a privileged staff, was recently forced to borrow \$3,000,000 from its parent union in order to meet expenses. Apparently, Mr. James hopes that this initiation fee will provide the union with 'light at the end of the tunnel' as far as its bank accounts are concerned.

See Also:

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