New York transit workers and the impeachment crisis

18 February 1999

To the Editor,

According to the public opinion polls about two out of every three Americans were against the impeachment of the president. Although I lack the scientific data to prove this, nevertheless I would say that the percentage of New York City transit workers opposed to impeachment is much higher. I make this evaluation based on my participation in discussions in the crew rooms and work areas where workers do not hesitate to make their opinions known.

Workers cannot understand how a sexual liaison between two consulting adults is grounds for any kind of legal action, let alone an impeachment of the president. They sense that there is something profoundly undemocratic in all this, although they rarely express this in explicit terms.

In many cases opposition to impeachment is bound up with political support of Clinton and illusions in the economy. I recall one worker who stated the reason they want to get Clinton is that he has done so much to increase living standards. I asked this worker if his living standards had gone up in the last six years. His only response was to ask me where I get my questions from.

Such illusions are common, but they raise the question of who actually is benefiting from the stock market boom, and who is not. When I asked a number of workers if any of them had experienced an increase in their living standards in the last six years, only one answered positively that he had, and that was because he got a job-title promotion.

Many workers easily recognize that the system works for the benefit of the rich and it is this layer that is benefiting from the Wall Street boom, not the working man. One worker strongly opposed to impeachment nevertheless told me he was disappointed in Clinton because he promised so much at the beginning of his presidency and has delivered so little. This worker noted that at the beginning of his first term Clinton spoke of a universal program of public healthcare, and now he is talking of privatizing Social Security.

When the crisis first emerged there was confusion about the significance of Kenneth Starr's judicial maneuvers around Monica Lewinsky. However, as the impeachment process began to take hold, the seriousness of what was happening became increasingly evident.

Nevertheless, the nature of the neo-fascistic forces behind the scheme is essentially not known. In connection with this, the role of the Democratic Party is not really grasped.

It appears to most workers that the Democrats have been fighting the impeachment of Clinton as vigorously as they could. After all, during the debates the Republicans for the most part argued for impeachment and the Democrats, for the most part, argued against. During the votes the Republicans for the most part voted for impeachment, and the Democrats mostly voted against. From the appearance of things, the Republicans were for impeachment, the Democrats against, and a line in the sand was drawn between the two parties.

All this time, the Democratic Party was hiding the role of the right-wing conspiracy, and the threat to establish more authoritarian forms of rule that was behind the drive to impeach the president. When I raised these issues I got into the most heated and potentially productive arguments.

Workers did not immediately agree, to a large extent because they did not know the facts. They took note of the few remarks that were made by Democratic Party politicians in condemning the right-wing conspiracy, and seemed satisfied with that. I maintained that these statements were few and hollow, especially when

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compared to their frenzied behavior in search of a censure compromise. It appeared that Senator Lott's, and other Republican Party politicians', ties with racist and anti-Semitic organizations did not deserve public comment, only Clinton's sexual liaison.

Many workers would, after a while, agree that the impeachment process was a threat to their democratic rights. It is for this reason the Democrats could not raise it. They sensed that they would get a hearing from the working class that they could not control.

As the impeachment trial in the Senate came to a conclusion, the undemocratic nature of the procedure became more obvious. Why, after all, more than one worker asked, did the senators have to conduct their final deliberations in secret? In addition, questions about the Constitution were raised. What would happen, one worker wanted to know, if Clinton were actually impeached in the Senate? Would the president simply leave office, or would the courts have to get involved before he would be forced out? What if Clinton refused to go, what would happen then?

It is as if workers were asking: can a two-thirds vote in the Senate actually overthrow the democratic forms of government, as we know them? Isn't there at least another step to help protect the will of the people?

Not a single worker raised the role of the unions. It is as if all and sundry agreed that the unions have no role to play in the most important political crisis, perhaps, since the American Civil War. One cannot blame the workers for this. The unions for the most part have nothing to say.

The official paper of the Transport Workers Union contains one brief comment by union President Sonny Hall opposing impeachment, on the same terms as the Democrats, and the president of the New York City local has not said a word on the issue. In addition, the "left" dissidents of the New Directions faction, who control almost half the executive board and issue a bimonthly newsletter, have likewise made no statement on the White House crisis.

On this threat to democratic rights, including union rights, both factions of the New York local are completely silent. They have joined with the Democratic Party and all the left newspapers that have said virtually nothing about the right-wing conspiracy.

The class role of these "leaders" is clear. They sense, as I do, that they could get a very popular response if they raised the conspiracy against democratic rights. That is precisely why they keep silent. They do not want to evoke a political awareness that would raise issues that go beyond their phony left reformism.

Workers realize that they face dangers, but they are not given the means to grasp the seriousness of the forces arrayed against them. If the ruling powers have come so close to a political coup under conditions of a stock market boom, what will they do under conditions of a stock market bust?

Only the *World Socialist Web Site* has consistently and thoroughly raised these issues before the working class, and therefore posed before workers the need to establish new forms of political leadership and struggle.

A New York transit worker

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