

# Workfare to start in New York City transit

Allan Whyte  
17 April 1999

The New York City Transit Authority and the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 have successfully completed negotiations to compel welfare recipients to work as cleaners, beginning April 19. The program is expected to start with 20 cleaners in Brooklyn, but the Authority anticipates that there will be roughly 1,000 workfare workers by the end of the year.

The New York City administration has wide experience in utilizing welfare workers in various public jobs, under the Work Experience Program (WEP). There are currently over 35,000 WEP workers doing cleaning jobs in sanitation and the parks department, working in various capacities in the hospitals, as well as doing clerical work in a wide variety of city agencies.

There have been hundreds of thousands of WEP workers since the program began in New York City several years ago. They are compelled to work for the equivalent of a minimum wage to receive their welfare checks. By law, they are not considered workers with the same rights with those who have civil service status. They cannot file grievances over poor or unhealthy working conditions, and can lose their welfare checks for the slightest infraction of workfare rules.

The agreement in transit, however, is the first time that the union and management have successfully negotiated the details of bringing the WEPs to work for the Transit Authority, the quasi-independent public agency which operates the massive bus and subway system.

The TWU agreed to do accept WEP in principle in January 1997, as a result of contract negotiations. At that time, the contract allowed for the reduction of more than 500 unionized workers in order to bring in an unlimited number of WEP workers who would be doing the same work as those that they replaced, but at

slave wages and working conditions. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani then vetoed this agreement because it violated his understanding with the other city unions that specifically prohibited any union worker from being replaced by a welfare worker. In addition, the replacement of civil servants by WEPs is a violation of the state's social services statutes.

While the city administration has always maintained that it has never violated this state law, the facts tell otherwise. In the last five years, as the WEP program has grown, the city has been able to cut approximately 14,000 jobs, most of them positions represented by the city unions. For example, there are currently 6,000 welfare workers cleaning and doing other jobs in the Parks Department, and they now outnumber unionized employees by a ratio of approximately 3 to 1. With this vast increase in cheap labor, the city parks have become cleaner, while the budget for park maintenance declined by roughly 20 percent.

The Mayor has now agreed to the use of WEPs in transit with the stipulation that there will not be a reduction of cleaner jobs, as was originally agreed to in the 1996-7 contract. It is clear that the sole purpose of this stipulation is to maintain the legal fiction that welfare workers do not replace unionized employees. Giuliani also seeks to maintain a positive relationship with the city's union leadership, most of whom, including the officials of the TWU, endorsed him for his reelection.

One of the more insidious aspects of the agreement is the creation of a Lead Cleaner title for those currently working as cleaners in civil service status. The agreement calls for the promotion of over 150 employees into this position within nine months. The first group of 17 Lead Cleaners has already been selected. Although they are not supervisors, they will receive an extra \$1.70 per hour in order to train, oversee, and administrate the work assignment of six-

person teams of WEP cleaners. In other words, management and the union are creating a layer of straw bosses whose function it will be to help enforce this cheap labor scheme in the workforce.

The TWU has been hailing this arrangement as a victory for the union. For example, when the negotiations were in progress in late March, Gary Hansjergen, the union's director in the stations department, said "everything the union told the Transit Authority to do they have agreed to." In reality, the purpose of this agreement is to make it possible for Mayor Giuliani to reach his goal of ending welfare in New York by the year 2000. In order for him to achieve this, it has been estimated that more than 300,000 adults will have to be on workfare or driven off the welfare rolls altogether by the end of the year.

This is why, at the same time as the transit deal was being negotiated, the city, has recently called upon thousands of welfare recipients who are either pregnant or the parents of babies less than one year old, to be ready for WEP assignments. In addition to this, the Human Resources Administration is also calling on recipients who care for handicapped family members to be prepared to accept workfare assignments.

Furthermore, with the current contract expiring at the end of the year, the introduction of a cheap labor force in transit gives management a tremendous advantage in its contract negotiations for wages and working conditions with the union.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**