

# Political lessons of the New York transit workers' contract struggle

The editorial board  
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Last December's threat of a strike by 33,000 New York City transit workers gave rise to an unprecedented assault on basic democratic rights. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, backed by the governor, the courts, the media and both political parties, moved to outlaw even the discussion of any form of struggle, with threatened legal penalties climbing to millions of dollars against ordinary workers.

On December 14, the last day of the old contract, when it appeared that transit workers might walk off their jobs for the first time in 20 years, Mayor Giuliani and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) obtained a court order which would penalize workers not only for carrying out job actions, but for merely expressing the opinion that such actions were needed.

The restraining order prohibited the Transport Workers Union (TWU) and individual union members from “in any manner or by any means, directing, calling, causing, authorizing, instigating, conducting, encouraging, threatening, participating in, assisting in, or approving of any strike, work stoppage, sick-out, slowdown, refusal to work as assigned, sabotage, vandalism, picketing with the intent to encourage any of these acts, or any other concerted activity intended to or tending to interrupt the normal and regular operations of the plaintiffs, and from all acts of any kind whatsoever in furtherance or in support thereof.”

The court order obtained by Giuliani also called for unprecedented penalties: a fine of \$1 million a day against the union for any violation of the court order, doubling for each succeeding day; and a fine of \$25,000 against each individual union member for the first day of violating the restraining order, to be doubled each succeeding day. The average annual wage of a transit worker is \$39,000. Had a strike as long as the 11-day walkout of 1980 taken place last December, each worker would have faced a \$25 million fine. This is in addition to fines under the Taylor Law, the state law that penalizes workers two days pay for each day on strike, which was imposed on the transit workers in 1980.

The city's media and political establishment applauded Giuliani's actions. The *New York Times* summed up their position when it wrote, “Mr. Giuliani wins points for using his bully pulpit and pushing for a court injunction to avert a strike.” The only criticism made by the *Times* was that the contract terms eventually offered to the union were too generous.

The mayor also received the unanimous support of Democratic and Republican politicians. From City Council Speaker Peter Vallone, to black Democratic politician Al Sharpton, who has organized numerous protests against police brutality, to Hillary Clinton, the mayor's all-but-certain opponent in the race for the open US Senate seat later this year, the Democrats found no fault with this trampling of basic democratic rights. Former Mayor Ed Koch, who led the attack on the 1980 strike, encouraged Giuliani's injunction, advising him to “Stand up! Stand firm! Don't give away the city because of an illegal strike. Don't let these bastards bring the city to its knees by engaging in an illegal strike.”

Giuliani justified his police-state measures by demonizing transit

workers in the same way he has sought to turn the most oppressed layers of the city's population—from taxi drivers to street vendors and the homeless—into social pariahs. Giuliani said the workers' demands would result in the doubling of transit fares. He accused them of setting out to kill people by crippling the transportation system and delaying emergency services.

The mayor supplemented his vilification of the workers with a dose of red-baiting. Seizing upon the existence of an opposition faction within the union known as New Directions, which includes several self-styled socialists and middle-class radicals, Giuliani suggested that the strike amounted to a communist plot. He expressed his desire to review New Directions' financial records, saying he was sure he would find “interesting” evidence, hinting that rank-and-file transit workers were the victims of behind-the-scenes manipulation by unnamed conspirators.

Virtually branding the transit workers as terrorists, the mayor deployed 3,000 extra police on the subways, even after the union agreed to new contract terms on December 15, threatening to arrest any worker who engaged in a slowdown to protest the deal.

The threat to lock up protesting workers was made in the absence of any evidence that a slowdown was taking place. How police would have recognized such an action in a system prone to delays was never explained. Giuliani's actions and rhetoric were aimed primarily at intimidating the workers and whipping up the middle class against them.

The united front faced by workers included not only City Hall, the Democrats, the media and the courts, but also their own union. While issuing vague strike threats in the days before the contract deadline, TWU Local 100 President Willie James was working at all costs to prevent any struggle. The union officials gave Giuliani the green light to get his injunction by warning him that no progress was being made at the talks.

At mass union meetings held on December 14, the union bureaucrats obediently read out the injunction and warned workers not to even utter the word “strike” if they were interviewed by reporters. The meetings exploded in anger.

One worker asked for a minute of silence. The tumultuous meeting quieted momentarily, after which the worker announced that he had called for the silence because “your union has just died.” At an afternoon meeting several thousand workers demonstrated their outrage by marching more than a mile to protest outside the union headquarters.

These were the circumstances under which a last-minute deal was brokered, two hours after the midnight deadline on December 15. The tentative agreement, on which the rank and file will vote, provides for wage increases of about 12 percent over three years, marginally more than other public employee unions have recently obtained. In exchange, however, the union agreed to productivity concessions, including the “broadbanding” of certain job titles, which will enable management to get more work out of each employee and eliminate jobs.

The contract language also includes a sentence stating that “cooperative efforts between the parties regarding the redeployment, reassignment, etc.,

of employees shall continue where necessary.” These and other provisions will more than pay for the wage hikes.

The 1999 negotiations took place in the midst of the longest and biggest stock market rise in Wall Street's history, with the budgets of both the MTA and the city in surplus. Why is it that workers seeking to make even modest gains in the midst of this boom were treated like criminals?

It is because the Wall Street boom, as well as the surge in corporate and banking profits and government finances, all depend on the suppression of workers' wages and living standards. Two recent studies have shown that income inequality has grown significantly in the country in the last two decades, with the greatest disparities in New York. In this state, adjusting for inflation, the income of the poorest families fell by \$2,900, to \$10,769, while the richest 20 percent of New York's families increased their income by an average of \$45,480, or more than 40 percent.

At the top of the economic ladder are tens of thousands of millionaires and multimillionaires who have made huge fortunes through financial speculation in the last decade. At the bottom are masses of the poor and exploited.

In addition to being the center of finance capital, the city is also the principal port of entry for immigration to the US. At least 1 million workers have come to the city from every corner of the globe, swelling the ranks of the poor and exploited. They are used as a source of cheap labor in the city's tourism industry and elsewhere, providing services to the wealthy for the minimum wage or less, without health care or other benefits.

Ultimately, a state of affairs in which the top 10 percent monopolize the lion's share of society's resources is incompatible with democratic forms of rule. To maintain and enforce this economic inequality, the entire political establishment has moved sharply to the right, and seeks to impose the most draconian forms of intimidation and repression against the working class and the poor.

That is why the growing social polarization has been accompanied by mounting police brutality and attacks on democratic rights. The brutality erupted recently in two major cases in New York: the sadistic torture of Abner Louima inside a police precinct, and the execution of an unarmed man, Amadou Diallo, by police in a hail of 41 bullets. At the same time, the curtailment of free speech and assembly rights has increasingly marked the rule of the Giuliani administration.

The mayor is boasting that the city is experiencing unprecedented good times. The truth is that the masses of working people in New York are extremely dissatisfied with the growing difficulties of just making ends meet, while the wealthy are multiplying their fortunes. The powers that be are well aware that they are sitting on a powder keg. They fear that a rebellion against inadequate wages and living standards will end the Wall Street boom that rests, in the final analysis, on the suppression of the working class. The tumbling of share values would in turn only sharpen class tensions and conflict.

It is for this reason that the possibility of a transit strike was treated in the ruling circles as something akin to a slave rebellion, which had to be stamped out before it spread. They were terrified at the prospect of a strike by this section of workers becoming a lightning rod for many other sections of the population, including the unorganized, the immigrant, and the most exploited workers, encouraging a major struggle against the corporations.

If transit workers had gone on strike, they would have had to defy the courts, both political parties, the entire establishment and the social interests which that they defend. To defend their struggle, they would have had to fight for a general strike of New York labor against the court injunctions and the Taylor Law, and any fines or jailings of workers. A walkout by subway and bus workers could have rapidly escalated into a confrontation that posed the question of power—who rules and in whose interests.

This leads to the most critical lessons of the transit workers' struggle. Despite their numbers, these workers and the rest of the working class remain essentially defenseless in the face of the one-sided class war that has intensified in recent years. They lack the political organization, leadership and perspective which are necessary to forge a movement powerful enough to defeat the government-backed attacks on living standards and democratic rights. Those workers organized in unions have found themselves just as powerless as the unorganized. The bureaucratized unions, which claim to represent them, are guardians of the status quo, inveterate supporters of capitalism and trusted partners of the ruling establishment.

In the case of the transit union, workers found their path blocked, not only by the veteran bureaucrats of the TWU, but also by the opposition faction of New Directions, which controls close to a majority of the union executive board and the leading posts in the union's rapid transit division.

New Directions, used as a foil by Giuliani in his red-baiting attacks on the transit workers, once again showed itself to be opposed to any struggle of behalf of the rank and file. These “dissidents” encourage precisely those illusions that have shown themselves to be bankrupt in today's economic and political situation. As more and more workers turn away in disgust from the corruption and treachery of the union, New Directions claims that pure and simple trade unionism is all that is needed.

Single-mindedly pursuing their ambition to wrest control of the bureaucracy from the Willie James faction, the New Directions leadership ignored the implications of the dictatorial measures of the Giuliani administration, concentrating their efforts on parliamentary maneuvers within the Local 100 executive board over the tentative settlement.

The experience in New York reveals in the starkest terms the fundamental issue confronting every section of workers: resisting the onslaught of big business and defending living standards and basic democratic rights require a new road of struggle—the independent political organization and mobilization of the working class.

The working class must build a mass party to establish its political independence from the big business parties and politicians, a party that will unite all sections of workers in a struggle against the capitalist system. With its own party, the working class will be able to fight for social equality and the democratic control of society's resources, advancing a socialist program for well-paying jobs, quality health care for all, decent schools, housing and public transportation. This program will take as its starting point the needs of the vast majority of the people, rather than the dictates of the market and the profit demands of the corporate elite and Wall Street financiers.

The Socialist Equality Party, and its international publication, the *World Socialist Web Site*, are dedicated to the construction of this independent party of the working class.



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