

# New York City mayor threatens transit workers

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New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg has threatened to slap the city's 35,000 transit workers with a court injunction if they so much as meet to take a strike vote. In his weekly radio broadcast November 22, Bloomberg declared, "If a strike vote is taken, we will go straight to court and ask a court for an order to keep that from happening."

Referring to New York State's anti-strike Taylor Law, he said, "If anybody does strike, the penalties are very severe." Under the law, workers can be fined two days' pay for every day on strike.

With the current transit contract set to expire December 15, Bloomberg is clearly seeking to intimidate workers with the threat of personal financial disaster. "These men and women, they work very hard, they do a great job," he said "They don't want to lose any money."

In a bid to turn popular sentiment against the transit workers, the mayor invoked both last year's terrorist attacks and the faltering economy. "This city cannot tolerate a strike in the middle of the Christmas shopping season after what we went through September 11," he said. "The public will not tolerate it."

In reality, the fear within both City Hall and the Wall Street finance houses is that a struggle by transit workers, or any other significant section of the working class, could encourage wider sections of working people to enter into struggle. The city has never been more polarized between rich and poor, and the Bloomberg administration is introducing a program of draconian budget cuts.

Bloomberg issued his threat against the transit workers after reaching agreement with the Democratic Party-controlled City Council on implementing an array of tax hikes and budget cuts that will fall squarely on workers and the middle class. To confront an

immediate \$1.1 billion budget deficit in what remains of the current fiscal year, they have agreed to increase property taxes by 18.5 percent and impose \$780 million in budget cuts at various city agencies. Much deeper cuts and additional regressive taxes are planned, as the city faces a projected deficit of \$6.4 billion next year.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), the agency that runs the city's bus and subway system, confronts a deficit of \$1.1 billion for 2003, and another \$1.7 billion budget gap the following year. Bloomberg, meanwhile, has stated repeatedly that he wants to eliminate the more than \$300 million that the city contributes to the MTA. As a result, the authority is threatening to both raise fares and cut bus and train service.

Transit workers are already tense and angry, following the death last week of two employees who, in separate incidents, were struck and killed by trains while working on the tracks. The union, Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, charged the men were killed because management has refused to enact adequate safety measures.

Even before these events, the union had accused the MTA of refusing to seriously negotiate the terms of a new contract. Bloomberg's threats indicate that the city's has decided to make an example of transit workers in an effort to intimidate the entire public workforce. Many municipal labor contracts are set to expire in the coming months, and the city administration has indicated it will push for major new concessions.

Bloomberg's threats are in line with the attacks on transit workers' democratic rights carried out by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in the last contract struggle three years ago. In December 1999, Giuliani obtained a court order threatening both the union and its members with

astronomical financial penalties for striking, or even raising the call for a strike.

The injunction, issued on the last day of the old contract, called for a fine against the union of \$1 million, to be doubled each day for any violation of the restraining order. It also called for a fine of \$25,000 to be doubled each day against each individual union member deemed in violation of the court order. If transit workers had struck as long as they did during the 11-day walkout in 1980, each worker would have faced more than \$25 million in fines. The average annual salary for transit workers at the time was less than \$40,000.

The leadership of Transport Workers Union Local 100 has drawn no lessons from the last contract dispute, when its officials ended up meekly reading out the terms of the injunction obtained by Giuliani and accepting a contract that provided salary hikes of just 4 percent a year, paid for through work-rule concessions. It has continued its support for Democratic Party politicians who closed ranks with Giuliani in support of the court action against the union.



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