

The New York City transit dispute—the class issues

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With the contract covering 34,000 New York City train operators, bus drivers and other mass transit employees set to expire December 15, both the city and the state of New York are threatening to carry out drastic repressive measures if there is a strike. Supporting these attacks, the mass media in the city has sought to whip up an atmosphere of hysteria against the workers.

The city administration of billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg went to court this week seeking an injunction that would ensure personal financial ruin for strikers and the destruction of their union. The measures demanded include \$25,000 fines against each individual worker on the first day of the walkout, with the penalty doubling for each additional day on the picket line. If workers stayed out 11 days—the length of the city’s last transit strike 22 years ago—the fine would mount to more than \$25 million each. Fines against their union, Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, would start at \$1 million, mounting to over \$1 billion in an 11-day stoppage.

Republican Governor George Pataki has sought further punitive sanctions under the state’s anti-union Taylor Law, including the jailing of union officials. He has also threatened to call out the National Guard in the event of a walkout.

This campaign of intimidation is aimed in the first instance at forcing New York’s transit workers to accept a contract that would saddle them with a wage freeze and ultimately cut real wages \$4,000 each by the end of three years. Starting salary for most transit workers is about \$33,000 a year, barely enough to pay for housing and food in a city that has among the highest living costs in the world.

More fundamentally, city and state governments, backed by New York’s powerful financial and corporate interests, are determined to defeat the transit workers in order to set an example. Their aim is to force public employees and the working class as a whole to pay for the fiscal crisis created by Wall Street’s tumbling share prices combined with the massive tax cuts doled out to big business and the wealthy over the past decade.

With the city, state and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) all facing multibillion-dollar deficits, the answer to this crisis from both Republican and Democratic officials is wage-cutting, the destruction of benefits and the dismantling of what little remains of the social safety net upon which the city’s growing ranks of unemployed, homeless and poor are forced to depend.

Underlying the strikebreaking threats and the ferocious denunciation of the workers and their union is a gaping class divide. Never has the chasm been so wide between the working class and poor, who make up the city’s vast majority, and those at the top of the city’s social ladder. New York boasts one of the greatest concentrations of

multimillionaires anywhere, together with a pampered upper middle class. These privileged layers have come to regard the rest of the population as little more than their servants and react with fear and anger to the threat of a transit strike, seeing it as something akin to a slave revolt.

Leading a campaign to vilify transit workers is the ineffable *New York Post*. There is more than a whiff of fascism in the tabloid’s denunciation of the transit union and its members. Its owner, Australian-born media magnate Rupert Murdoch, is himself a specialist in breaking unions in the newspaper industry. He speaks for an extreme right-wing group within the ruling elite that is infuriated that a section of the working class would even threaten to fight back.

The *Post* has repeatedly described the strike threat as a union “jihad,” equating the refusal to submit to management with the September 11 terrorist attacks. It has called for workers to be fired and jailed, while waging a vile campaign of character assassination against Local 100 President Roger Toussaint.

In an editorial on city strike preparations, the *Post* declared: “The most important step the city can take? Prepare an arrest warrant for Transit Workers Union leader Roger Toussaint.” The editorial concluded, “True, even these sanctions may not deter Toussaint’s jihad. In which case, if someone’s got a tougher penalty, we’d be all ears.”

Toussaint, with justification, responded that the newspaper was calling for his assassination.

The paper’s editorial page editor, John Podhoretz, son of the neo-conservative guru Norman Podhoretz, drafted a column attributing the threat of a strike to union members “whose fantasy it is that evil bosses are exploiting the workers.” He called for the state to fire transit workers the way Reagan fired PATCO strikers in 1981.

Dismissing workers’ concerns about management’s drive for productivity increases, Podhoretz writes: “It means that when one guy who does nothing retires, a second guy who does nothing will have to take on the first guy’s responsibilities rather than the MTA hiring a third guy who can spend 30 years doing nothing just like the first two guys.”

Podhoretz should tell that to the families of the four workers killed on the tracks in the past 18 months because of the Transit Authority’s attempt to boost productivity by refusing to observe federal safety standards. Better yet, why doesn’t he drag himself down to the tracks and see how he fares? No doubt, having imbibed the rigorous work standards of Reverend Moon’s and Rupert Murdoch’s editorial boards, he can show the workers how it’s done, increasing output while dodging trains. All for the princely sum of \$33,000 a year.

While the *Post* is the most virulent in its attack on transit workers, it

is by no means alone. In its usual sanctimonious style, the *New York Times* editorialized that “workers have neither the legal nor the moral right to hold the city hostage ... nothing would excuse a transit strike at a time when the city is in fragile financial and emotional condition.”

The media is unable to summon up similar moral outrage when big business “holds the city hostage.” Thus, they reported without comment news that investment banking and securities firm Bear, Stearns & Company is threatening to leave the city once again unless it receives tens of millions of dollars more in tax breaks and other subsidies.

This is in effect an employer strike threat endangering the livelihoods of thousands of workers. It is also the third time in barely a decade that the finance house has issued a similar extortion threat, each time coming away with massive benefits paid for by taxpayers. No one calls this “hostage-taking”; it’s just business. In the last few years alone, billions of dollars in such subsidies—drained out of vital social services—have been forked over in response to corporate threats to stage “walkouts” from the city.

As for the city’s “fragile” emotions in the wake of the September 11 attacks, they don’t become an issue when corporations carry out wholesale attacks on their workers. Thus, when Verizon announced this month that it plans to sack 3,500 telephone workers, or when the city threatens to cut funds for everything from daycare to meals for the elderly, editorialists merely note that tough times call for tough measures.

Transit workers and every section of the working population should treat such hypocritical arguments with contempt. It is the same claim that has been made since 1975, when the city was brought back from the brink of bankruptcy and the banks were bailed out with sacrifices, layoffs and budget cuts negotiated between City Hall and the union bureaucracy. Even during the period of the longest stock market boom in history, public officials and the media insisted on concessions and cutbacks from workers, conscious that the billions made on Wall Street had to be paid for through fresh attacks on workers.

Once again, the Metropolitan Transit Authority is claiming that it is deeply in the red and can sustain itself only through cutting employee compensation and raising passenger fares. The union has responded that management is exaggerating its financial crisis in order to push through its reactionary agenda.

While the claims of a deficit may be inflated, the agency’s fiscal crisis is real enough, the result of definite policies pursued over the last two decades. The running of the transit system, like every other public institution, is subordinated to the interests of the wealthy.

To expand tax cuts for the rich and the corporations, operating subsidies for the city’s subway and bus system have been eliminated on the federal level, while neither the state nor the city have provided any increase in nearly a decade, despite a sharp increase in ridership. As part of its budget cuts, the city is proposing to slash its own contribution. To make up for the shortfall, the MTA has turned increasingly to fare-based bonds as its main source of financing, incurring a total debt approaching \$30 billion. Management’s aim is to compel both transit workers and the riding public to shoulder the full weight of this debt burden.

As for the claim that workers have no “moral right” to strike, nothing would have a more powerful moral effect than for transit workers to shut the city down. A transit strike would demonstrate the objective power of the working class to stand up against the massive assault that is being carried out against its living standards and basic

rights not only in New York City, but nationwide.

The city and state’s attempt to bully transit workers into submission with the anti-union Taylor Law is essentially no different than the use of the bankruptcy courts to wage an unprecedented attack on the jobs, wages and working conditions of tens of thousands of workers at US Airways, United and throughout the airline industry.

Resisting these attacks requires above all a political strategy. The last city transit strike in 1980 brought the Koch administration to the verge of collapse before it was called off by a TWU bureaucracy that was terrified of the political implications of continuing the walkout.

The threat of jailings, fines and the National Guard only underscores that transit workers today face a political struggle that cannot be won based on the narrow trade union outlook of the TWU bureaucracy or through its alliance with the Democratic Party. Toussaint has in the past week appealed for both Governor George Pataki and Mayor Michael Bloomberg to join the talks, promoting the illusion that these politicians will somehow intervene in the workers’ favor.

A massive movement of support can and must be built among working people in New York City. Millions of workers, youth, immigrants and struggling middle class people will respond to a clear demand that Wall Street, the corporations and the rich be forced to pay for the crisis, rather than working people. There is bitter opposition to cuts in services and the Bloomberg administration’s proposals to raise taxes for every section of the population except for the rich, who are to receive another windfall.

This opposition can find active expression only through a struggle against a political establishment that represents the interests only of the corporations, banks and the super-rich. Working people in New York City and nationally need their own political party based on a fight for social equality and genuine democratic control of the mass transit system and the rest of society’s vital resources.

Only such a party can advance a socialist program that begins with the needs of the majority of society, rather than the interests of the corporate elite and Wall Street financiers, and fights for well-paying jobs, decent housing and schools, and free quality health care and mass transportation for all.

The Socialist Equality Party is committed to the defense of the transit workers through a fight for this program. The confrontation building up in New York City demonstrates the urgency of building the SEP as the mass party of the working class to carry forward this struggle.



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