

New York transit union leaders accept take-away contract

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18 December 2002

Bowing to threats of massive fines and jailings if they called a strike, the leadership of Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 accepted a tentative contract Monday night that saddles 34,000 New York City bus and subway workers with a pay package that will not even keep pace with inflation.

The settlement was reached 17 hours after the old contract expired at 12:01 a.m. Monday, after the union had “stopped the clock.” The 47-member Local 100 executive board approved the agreement by a three-to-one margin, clearing the way for it to be mailed out for a ratification vote by the rank and file.

The deal offers workers no raises at all in the first year—only a one-time \$1,000 “bonus”—and just 3 percent hikes in the second and third years. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) had insisted from the start that it would offer no increases for the last two years of the pact unless they were offset by stepped-up productivity.

One such victory claimed by management is the union’s agreement to the merger of the Manhattan and Bronx Surface Transit Operating Authority (MaBSTOA) into the New York City Transit Authority bus division. The MTA has estimated that this move will save it at least \$80 million over the life of the contract through the rationalization of bus jobs.

The MTA has long sought to combine these two systems, which have different work rules and pension systems, as part of a larger scheme to create a huge regional bus company that would include all the private bus companies operating in the city as well. The aim is to use this consolidation to eventually strip all MTA employees of civil service rights, which MaBSTOA workers currently lack.

It has also been reported that the contract gives the MTA productivity gains throughout the subway system through the “broadbanding” of job categories, allowing

the MTA to assign workers from one job title to perform tasks normally completed by those in other titles.

The agency rebuffed a union demand for a three-year no-layoff clause. It will thus be free to put both bus and subway workers onto the street if it is able to use the bus merger and broadbanding to consolidate the workforce and eliminate jobs.

Rank-and-file workers are waiting with trepidation to see what else the union bureaucracy gave up. The TWU Local 100 presidents who negotiated the last two contracts—Demaso Seda in 1995 and Willie James in 1999—were both forced out of office after transit workers discovered that they had concealed substantial givebacks in the agreements they negotiated.

“We think today marks a turning point in the relationship between the MTA and its unions,” said the MTA’s chairman, Peter Kalikow, in announcing the settlement. “We have gone from confrontation to cooperation.” The multimillionaire Republican real estate developer then exchanged hugs and what one newspaper described as “cheek-to-cheek contact” with Local 100 President Roger Toussaint.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg praised the contract for incorporating productivity increases to offset any salary hikes. He is insisting that the same principle be applied to some 200,000 city employees whose contracts have either expired or are near expiration. “That is something we are just going to have to learn to live with in this day and age in the private sector and the public sector,” Bloomberg said. “The world is different than it was before.” The Bloomberg administration is demanding \$600 million in concessions from municipal workers, while enacting another tax cut for the wealthy.

After having run for union office as a dissident and a militant, Toussaint has negotiated a contract that represents the most far-reaching collaboration between management and the TWU Local 100 bureaucracy in the

union's history. It accepts the principle that the working class must pay for the city and state fiscal crises resulting from the bursting of the Wall Street bubble.

Toussaint was elected president of the union in 2000 after denouncing his predecessor for negotiating a contract three years ago that provided twice as much in salary hikes as the agreement he has now accepted. He ran as the candidate of the New Directions slate, a dissident faction of the union that included some veterans of the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s who advocated a policy of militant unionism around economic demands, eschewing any political program that challenged the union's alliance with the Democratic Party and its support for the capitalist status quo.

Toussaint has since distanced himself from those who founded the faction—several of whom were among the executive board members voting against the tentative agreement. Nonetheless, Toussaint's actions are the realization of their trade unionist perspective, exposing its impotence in the face of the political offensive that the employers and the government are waging against the working class as a whole.

While transit workers represent one of the largest and most powerful sections of the workforce in New York City—running a massive bus and subway system that transports some 7 million riders daily—they found themselves essentially impotent in the face of threatened injunctions that would have bankrupted not only their union, but every single member. The legal threats were supplemented by a campaign by the media and politicians to vilify the unionized workers, comparing them to terrorists.

To defy such threats would have required a campaign to win broad support from throughout the working population of New York City—both organized and unorganized—against the policies of cutbacks and austerity demanded by the corporations and banks. A strike would have meant a political confrontation and could only have been effective to the extent that it was waged as part of struggle for the political mobilization of the working class as a whole, independent of the two parties of big business.

Like the rest of the trade union bureaucracy, Toussaint is incapable of carrying out such a struggle. Since taking office, he has accommodated himself to the labor officialdom and the Democratic Party.

The union's chief negotiator in the contract talks was Basil Paterson, a Harlem Democrat who served previously as New York State secretary of state and state senator. Among those joining Toussaint to announce the

tentative pact were New York City's former Democratic mayor David Dinkins and Brian McLaughlin, the Queens Democratic Party leader who doubles as president of the city's Central Labor Council.

Also present was Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers and the Municipal Labor Committee representing all city public employees. In the last election, she endorsed Republican Governor George Pataki, who had vowed to invoke the union-busting Taylor Law to fine the transit union and potentially jail its leaders and members in the event of a strike.

In the end, it was not only the union leadership's capitulation that prevented a strike, but also a conscious decision within the New York corporate and political establishment to tone down an increasingly confrontational atmosphere that had built up in the weeks leading up to the contract deadline.

There was a palpable fear within New York's ruling elite that a transit strike could turn into a lightning rod for discontent among broad sections of the population, including the most exploited, in what has become one of the most socially polarized cities in the world. Rather than provoke a walkout and attempt to smash the union, it decided that the drive to make workers pay for the city and state fiscal crises could best be carried out by utilizing the collaboration of the union bureaucracy.

The aborted confrontation over the transit contract and the sellout by the Local 100 leadership has set the stage for a wave of attacks on public employees and every other section of the working class in New York City in the coming months. This experience has made it clear that workers will be able to defend their rights only by organizing their struggles on an independent political basis, in opposition to the existing trade union structures.



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