

New York: Governor and mayor threaten transit workers over strike

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With the contract covering 34,000 New York City transit workers expiring on December 15, both the state's governor and the city's mayor have threatened to impose an array of repressive and punitive measures if their union dares to strike.

Indicating that he will call out the National Guard to break any strike, Governor George Pataki warned Transport Workers Union Local 100 and its members that they would face "very grave consequences" if they walk out. Mayor Michael Bloomberg had already said more than two weeks ago that he would seek the implementation of the state's Taylor Law, which fines public employees two days pay for every day on the picket lines if they should strike. The chief of the city's Law Department has stated that, on top of the Taylor Law, "the city in my view has additional remedies that it has a right to invoke."

Three years ago, on the eve of the contract deadline, former mayor Rudolph Giuliani obtained a court injunction that would have fined transit workers \$25,000, to be doubled each day that they remained on strike. It also forbade workers or the union from even discussing a strike. A walkout was averted when the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and the union reached a last-minute deal.

In an attempt to pit the riding public against transit workers, Mayor Bloomberg said a strike "would endanger human life and devastate our economy." The city has unveiled a plan to provide alternate means of transportation, which would include additional ferry service, carpooling and increasing the use of the school bus service. "You cannot let a group of irresponsible people bring the city to its knees," the mayor told a City Hall press conference. "Nor can we be intimidated by them." He claimed that a transit strike could lead to layoffs of workers throughout the city.

These public threats follow a strike authorization vote taken by rank-and-file transit workers on Saturday. More than 5,000 members of Local 100 turned out at two mass membership meetings, voting almost unanimously to authorize the union's officials to call a strike.

The meeting itself took place against the backdrop of continued intransigence by the MTA which, after months of refusing to negotiate with the union, finally made a contract offer demanding draconian attacks on workers' rights. According to union estimates, if the MTA proposal were accepted it would cost the average worker almost \$10,000 over the life of the three-year contract. The MTA offer would impose a wage freeze in the first year, and would provide wage hikes in the next two years only if their cost was offset by increased productivity. The productivity proposal includes the broadbanding of various job titles. For example, a car cleaner would be required to do the work of higher paid electricians and painters. They are also seeking to increase employee payments into pension funds and for health funds.

At the union meetings, Roger Toussaint, the president of Local 100, read out the latest editorial attack by the *New York Post* against the union. The *Post* editorial published the previous day called for the jailing of union officials and the plundering of the union's assets: "[President Toussaint] deserves a stretch on ice should his members turn their backs on Gotham and its riders.... How effective can Toussaint be from the inside of a jail cell—while his union is forced to pay millions in fines?"

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." Transit workers were infuriated by the *Post*'s attempt

to equate a strike with the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, a theme that has been echoed by the mayor. Toussaint has charged that the newspaper is effectively calling for him to be killed.

The MTA claims it faces a \$2.7 billion budget deficit and has threatened to increase fares and cut back bus and subway service. It is also demanding that transit workers sacrifice to cover the authority's deficits.

Both the city and the state are facing huge budget deficits as well. New York State confronts an immediate \$2 billion deficit this year and a possible \$10 billion in the next fiscal year. The city, meanwhile, faces a shortfall next year of at least \$4 billion even after deep budget cuts and major tax hikes announced by Bloomberg and the Democratic-controlled City Council.

Bloomberg has already warned that the city cannot afford to pay municipal workers any wage increases unless they are tied to increased productivity. He has also threatened to lay off city workers if their unions do not agree to millions of dollars in givebacks, including longer workweeks and increased out-of-pocket contributions for health benefits. Most city unions are presently working under expired contracts.

Both the mayor and the governor are working closely with the MTA in the present negotiations, determined to make an example of transit workers. Local 100's agreement in 1999 set the pattern for virtually all other municipal union contracts. Bloomberg is hoping to see a concessions pact imposed during the present round of bargaining to set the precedent for extracting some \$600 million in givebacks that he has demanded from city workers over the coming year.

The leadership of TWU Local 100 has failed to prepare transit workers for the kind of political confrontation that is posed by the present bargaining impasse. While the city and the media have attempted to whip up an atmosphere of hysteria over a looming contract deadline, casting the workers as extortionists and terrorists, the Local 100 bureaucracy has done nothing to mobilize its own rank and file, not to mention the support of broader sections of the working class.

Instead, the Toussaint leadership has appealed for Pataki to intervene in the talks, apparently hoping that the Republican governor will repeat the kind of concessions he granted the hospital workers and

teachers unions earlier this year in a successful bid to win their endorsements for his reelection campaign. Pataki has declined, however, and clearly supports a drive to force through givebacks.

The union officials have also continued to place their faith in Democratic politicians who have repeatedly turned against transit workers. It was only a year ago in a mass membership meeting that the leadership brought Senator Hillary Clinton to speak to the union members. During the 1999 contract dispute, she backed Giuliani's union-busting campaign, declaring her support for the Taylor Law and asserting that public employees should not have the right to strike.

Transit workers must fight to organize independently of the present leadership to establish a broad unity with the rest of the city's workforce, the unemployed, students and the broad masses of underpaid workers who make up the bulk of New York's population. A successful struggle requires bringing forward these forces in a united struggle against the attempt to make the entire working class pay for the deepening fiscal crisis created by Wall Street. This can only take place on the basis of an independent political mobilization of the working class against both big business parties.



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