

# New York bus workers end strike

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Bus drivers, mechanics and cleaners returned to work Monday after being on strike since March 3 against Bee-Line/Liberty Lines Bus Company in Westchester County, New York. The strike by 568 members of Local 100 of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) was over wages, health benefits and retirement age. During the course of the strike, 41 workers were arrested on the picket lines. About 55,000 commuters were affected by the walkout, which halted the company's bus service from New York City's northern suburbs.

Westchester County Executive Andy Spano, a Democrat, clearly sided with the company against the workers' demands, especially their push to lower retirement age. In a clear attempt to divide the strikers from transit riders, he claimed that a victory for the bus workers would translate into higher bus fares, as well as a boost in property taxes, which are currently used to subsidize the bus company by as much as \$25 million per year. However, as soon as the tentative settlement was reached, Liberty Lines President Jerry D'Armora, Local 100 President Roger Toussaint, and the county executive all praised each other for negotiating the agreement. Spano is now saying that the new contract will not lead to either increase fares or higher property taxes.

Although the four-year deal was accepted by a 3-to-1 margin, many workers expressed their dissatisfaction with the settlement. According to press reports, workers were shouting at the union leadership as they announced the terms of the settlement. Many left the union meeting in disgust.

"The contract we're getting now, we could have had Day One. To give us this after six weeks, it's embarrassing," one worker told the press. "I cannot stress how angry I am."

For many workers, the most important issue was the lowering of the retirement age. Drivers complain of a stressful combination of forced overtime, traffic and

pollution. They suffer from work-related ailments such as hypertension and heart attacks, and report that many co-workers have died just a few years after reaching retirement.

Under the old contract, workers could not retire before age 62 without a reduction in pension benefits. The union was demanding that the age be lowered to 57, and the company countered with a proposal to lower it to 60. According to the agreement, workers with 20 years of service will have to work until reaching age 62 this year, 61 next year, 60 in 2007, and 59 in 2008 in order to avoid a reduction in pension benefits.

Wage increases total 12.75 percent over four years. The hike will almost certainly leave workers with a reduction in real wages. Consumer prices in the New York metropolitan area rose by 1.7 percent in March, the biggest one-month leap in 23 years. The workers will also be required to contribute more to their health benefits in the form of greater weekly payroll deductions and higher co-payments for every doctor's and hospital visit.



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