

Behind the media onslaught on the transit workers

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While New York City's striking transit workers were winning broad sympathy and support from millions of working people this week, the mass media swung into action with a predictably unanimous campaign of hysterical slanders against the strikers.

This may have been predictable, but it was no less significant. Both print and broadcast media, in every case the organs of billion-dollar corporate empires, did their best to ignore the public support for the workers, while manufacturing their own version of public opinion.

Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* was perhaps the crudest along these lines, with an overline, "A message from New York commuters to striking workers," followed by the screaming two-word headline, "You Rats."

On television, ABC News found someone unable to get to his brother's wake, which was blamed on the strikers. Television reporters cornered an emergency medical technician and attempted to get him to say that the workers had endangered the life of a patient whose trip to the hospital was slowed by traffic. Several individuals were featured in 20-second sound bites with one-word punch lines like "outrageous" and "unconscionable," referring to the strike. No transit workers or supporters were interviewed on camera.

The *Daily News*, owned by multimillionaire Mortimer Zuckerman, took the prize for rabid labor-baiting verging on incitement to violence, with an editorial entitled, "Throw Roger from the train!" referring to TWU Local 100 President Roger Toussaint.

"Roger Toussaint, we dare you to take to the Brooklyn Bridge this morning to tell the cold, walking throngs why you chose to disrupt the lives of millions, jacked up the expenses of tens of thousands, shuttered and crimped business, opened the subway system to terrorism and generally threatened the public health and welfare," the *News* editors shrieked.

"It would be delicious watching you try to justify the

reckless, lawless transit strike that you have inflicted on the city—assuming your fellow New Yorkers didn't hurl you over the railing into the icy waters before you got a word out ..."

In fact, although those crossing the Brooklyn Bridge no doubt include some disgruntled middle class and wealthy commuters, it's a safe bet that transit workers would also be met with warm support there, as evidenced by drivers honking in support of transit pickets, and even in numerous letters to the same papers whose editors denounced the workers.

What passes for the "liberal" press joined in the attacks on the union. The *New York Times* headlined its nervous editorial, "An Unnecessary Transit Strike," while *Newsday* denounced this "outrageous and illegal action."

The media attacks against the workers fall into two main categories: First, the transit workers, averaging more than \$50,000 annually in wages, are greedy. Second, in the pious and hypocritical words of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, "we live in a country of laws where there can be severe consequences for those who break them."

Talk of greed is a bit ironic from a man who just spent more than \$70 million to buy his reelection, or more than \$100 for each ballot cast in his favor. Bloomberg is mayor of the capital of world finance for one overwhelming reason—his enormous wealth. No one who stops to consider his background and qualifications, even accepting his claims to managerial expertise, can doubt for a moment that he would never have been considered for the post, nor would his name even be known to the vast majority of the population, if not for his wealth. He convinced his fellow billionaires that he would do an effective job in defending their interests, and he then bought the election, something that was not very difficult considering the nature of the American two-party system and the complete political disenfranchisement of the working class majority.

Shameless is too mild a word to describe the arrogance of the billionaires who scream greed against workers who are paid barely enough to live on while carrying out work that is

physically and psychologically stressful. Meanwhile, at this very moment, the Wall Street brokerage houses are handing out million-dollar year-end bonuses to several thousand traders whose work includes nothing productive.

It is interesting to note, by the way, that in recent years the newspapers have generally trumpeted the appearance of these year-end bonuses in the financial services sector, pointing to them as a sign of vitality for the local economy. This year, in the midst of the strike of the “greedy” transit workers, the Wall Street bonus story seems to have disappeared.

What about the charge of illegality? We are ruled by a government in Washington that was illegal and illegitimate from its first day in office nearly five years ago. The figurehead for this cabal is a man who has been secretly authorizing illegal wiretapping of thousands of US citizens over the last several years. Last weekend George W. Bush proudly reaffirmed his right to make his own rules and ignore laws he opposes.

None of the newspaper reporters covering the transit strike has asked Bloomberg, the Republican mayor, for his opinion on the rule of law in this case. Perhaps that is what he meant when he said that “there *can* be severe consequences” for breaking the law. It does not follow automatically. The workers who courageously defy an anti-strike law, a law comparable to the laws defied by the millions who organized trade unions in the 1930s and fought against Jim Crow segregation in the 1950s and 1960s, must be punished. A president who moves toward the destruction of the most basic democratic rights is another matter entirely.

Behind the lies spread against the transit workers are very definite material interests and a definite strategy being pursued by dominant sections of the US political and financial establishment. The aims are spelled out in the *Wall Street Journal*, the mouthpiece of extreme reaction.

The December 21 editorial explains what is at stake in the transit strike. The editors are somewhat contemptuous even of Republican Governor George Pataki and Mayor Bloomberg for having “caved” to the municipal unions in the past. By this they mean that the big business politicians have been unable to push through the kinds of attacks on the wages and benefits of public employees that are deemed necessary.

The incredible polarization and explosion of wealth for a tiny handful on Wall Street is not enough to assure the health of the capitalist system. The system, by its own admission, in the words of the *Journal*, requires a relentless and unending series of attacks on every gain that has been made by working people over the past century. The editors seethe with fury over workers’ salaries of \$50,000 a year. Pensions and health care also have to go, especially to set a precedent

for literally millions of government workers elsewhere. Public transit itself has to go, according to the *Journal*. “Pataki and Bloomberg ... could use this strike as an opportunity to end the public transit monopoly by legalizing all forms of private competition—including jitneys.”

In an Op-Ed column in the same issue of the *Journal*, Steven Malanga of the right-wing Manhattan Institute think tank calls for New York’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority to follow the example of Ronald Reagan. “Faced with a militant public-sector union that violated the law with a walk-out, President Reagan dismissed thousands of air traffic controllers in 1981 and rebuilt the nation’s air traffic system with a new work force.” According to Malanga, the strikers, with their “relatively unskilled unionized jobs,” could be replaced.

The myth of Reagan as the union-busting Superman is greatly overstated, since he would never have been able to crush the PATCO union without the active collaboration of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which refused to lift a finger in support of those workers. Malanga’s main point, however, retains its significance. More and more the spokesmen of big business are saying that the survival of their system demands a never-ending race to the bottom, as far as wages and living standards are concerned. This shows what is posed by the transit workers’ struggle and the venomous response it has engendered. For the transit workers and every other section of working people to defend even the most basic elements of their living standards and their futures, they will have to fight politically, and they will have to answer the onslaught of big business with an independent political struggle and a socialist program.



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