

New York City transit workers defiant

“Bloomberg and his friends are the thugs, not us”

**A WSWS reporting team
22 December 2005**

On the second day of the strike by 34,000 New York City transit workers, they expressed defiance in the face of threats of massive fines, the media campaign to vilifying them and the treachery of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) International leadership. Picket lines have been set up at train and bus depots throughout the five boroughs of the city, in neighborhoods where transit workers live and are well known.

Despite the disruptive impact of the strike on millions of transit users, working people throughout the city showed sympathy for the striking workers, with passing cars honking their horns in support, bicycle riders expressing solidarity, and workers and high school students visiting the picket lines. This stood in sharp contrast to the picture the news media has tried to paint of a city enraged at “selfish” transit workers.

At the same time there was a heavy police presence at the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) locations, aimed at intimidating strikers. Police ordered the picketers to stay on the sidewalk, set up wooden barricades to pen them in and told strikers to extinguish the fires in oil drums they lit to stay warm. These actions were in line with Mayor Bloomberg’s effort to criminalize transit workers, whom he denounced as being “thuggish.”

At a train depot near downtown Brooklyn, Chas, a train operator who has worked for the MTA for 22 years, said, “The MTA has to stop hurting us poor folk and trying to take back the little bit that we have. Who is this [MTA boss] Kalikow? I’d like to know, what is *his* track record, his qualifications for his job that pays so well? I’d like to know what raises Kalikow gets. But you never hear about that in the press, who this Kalikow is. We are just trying to survive like the rest of the working class.

“Everything in the *Post* is slanted toward Bloomberg and Kalikow and against the workers; they’re all just cronies, and the editors tell them what to print.”

Chas felt strongly that the hypocrisy of billionaires like Kalikow and Bloomberg attacking the pensions of workers who are struggling needed to be exposed, and the audacity of management, “which one day tells us they don’t have any money for raises, and the next day turns up millions of dollars.” He felt the union bureaucracy should also be scrutinized. “Someone should look into how the unions have been diminished. I’m sure they’re having private meetings behind closed doors. We don’t know what deals they’re making. As for the TWU International—put the rat in front of the International for selling us out. What’s the reason? Politics is the reason. But where are all our politicians? Not one of them has come out to support us.

“They attack us, say we’re bankrupting the city, but we didn’t spend billions of dollars on the war in Iraq, taking it away from social services and education.”

As for the conditions on the job, Chas described the health problems sustained by workers affecting their lungs, hearing and eyesight. “What’s the average survival, two to four years after retirement? They want to raise the retirement age from 55 to 62, but who’s guaranteeing you’ll even get to be 62?”

Thomas, who has been a track worker for five and a half years, was indignant. “I have to put up with rats, I inhale steel dust every night. Anybody who is not willing to do that has no right to tell me to be satisfied with unhealthy working conditions and then attack my health benefits. I have no recourse if I get sick. Bloomberg has his resources, his insurance if he gets sick. But what do I have? It only speaks to the plight of the worker that he is called greedy for fighting for what he needs.

“And don’t tell me to lessen my position because others are worse off. Instead of bringing me down, we need to bring everyone up to this level, at a minimum. Have people been so fooled by the media to believe that transit workers are greedy? And to accept this Taylor Law like it was handed down with the Ten Commandments?”

Another worker, who has been a conductor with the MTA for five years, scoffed, “And all this is over what, 3 to 4 percent? Transit is the greedy one. All the things that Bloomberg says about us, about being thugs, and selfish, applies to them not us.”

Adrian Dickerson, a train conductor with 15 years’ seniority, said, “The MTA has a surplus. They made us sacrifice after 9/11, and we gave up a lot to save the right to retire at 55 after 25 years of service. They kept that money and made interest on it. Ridership is up and we work harder, that’s how they got the surplus, but they don’t want to pay the workers.

“After the last contract, when they were crying broke, we found out that they had a surplus, but were keeping double books to hide it. This time we found out they had a surplus before the contract. That’s why we’re so angry.”

Aaron Cox, a car cleaner with seven years, said, “Everything is going up: food, rent, lights. We’re not overpaid—we’re just making it. A conductor makes \$23 an hour; a motorman \$25. That’s just getting by, especially with the costs of living in New York.”

Adrian then discussed the importance of being able to retire at 55. “You don’t last long after retiring,” she said. “My mother used to work on death benefits for the MTA. She would look at the cases of motormen, conductors, station cleaners and track workers and ask me, ‘Why do you only live a couple of years after you leave this place?’

“Every day you are inhaling steel dust and other toxins. When you come home and blow your nose all that dust and chemicals comes out. When you’re working on the tracks underground, you ask yourself: what is that leaking on top of my head? By the time you’re through on this job, your body is all broken up.”

She went on to explain the degrading treatment workers receive from management. “I’m a conductor and I have 50 stops on my train. I never know when I have to go to the bathroom, but when I do I have to call in and ask for permission. They’ll say, ‘Can you hold it ’til you get to 14th Street?’ When I get there they say, ‘Can you hold it to 42nd Street?’ When we get to 42nd Street, all the bathrooms are boarded up, and they tell me to go to the Starbucks on the street level. While I’m doing this, they call my driver and ask him where I am. They tell him if she’s not there in one minute, discharge the train, which means order the passengers off and bring the train back in. Then you get written up with a G-2 form—that’s the discipline issue we don’t like. Why should I have to ask permission to go to the bathroom?”

Another worker, a mason with five years, said, “This isn’t about racism, this is about the rich and the poor. It’s about classes. They want to fine us \$25,000 for striking. Well, after taxes, I only make about \$25,000. Who are they kidding?”

At the transit complex in East New York, Brooklyn, Brian Small, a repairman with 13 years, said, “I do not agree with the International. They are selling us out. They are not for the workers. They are serving their own self-interests. The International is with Bloomberg and with all the politicians that are against the strike.

“This is not just a struggle of transit workers. All workers in the city—like the sanitation, fire and teachers—support us because we all have the same problem. We should give not give in to the MTA by sacrificing the pensions and health benefits of the new hires.

“The business community wants to destroy pension and health benefits of all workers in order to reduce their operating costs. So they are trying to get rid of guaranteed pensions and instead give us 401(k)s that depend on how your investments are doing. And if they are not doing well, you could end up with nothing. This change is happening in all the major companies, such as AT&T, Verizon, and the airlines.

“The politicians like Hillary Clinton, Fernando Ferrer and Bloomberg are the same. They just want the votes. Bloomberg complains that we are demanding too much, but it is okay for him to spend \$75 million of his own money in order to become mayor. There must be some reason for this that involves helping his billion-dollar business as well as his billionaire buddies. They all work together against us. They don’t give a damn about the working-class person. They would like to have us all work for the minimum wage.”

Jose Mendina, a bus driver with 23 years of service, was picketing in uptown Manhattan. He said, “This contract is all about us giving back. What about them giving us something back for all the work that we do? I just had a \$4,500 dental bill. It is about time that we had a better dental plan. I am 46 years old and have worked for the transit authority for 23 years. I have 9 more years to go. The issue here is, how do we survive this?

“One of our teachers who gives us a refresher course in bus operation told us that the average lifespan of a retiree is two years. If life expectancy is two years, why do they want givebacks on pensions? They want you to die on the job.”

A bus maintainer with 16 years said, “The Taylor Law is a Caesar’s law—a law of the master against the slave. The politicians use the word democracy, but they don’t mean what they say. The Taylor law is a dictatorial law against working people.

“The International is selling us out. They are with the politicians. Their role in this strike is an attack on all workers. That is why the members of the other unions support us. All the politicians stick

together to protect each other. They all have something to gain. If they are united, why can’t working people be united?”

The shutdown of the transit system has caused hardship for millions of daily riders. Those seeking to use the Long Island Railroad and Metro North regional train systems had to put up with long delays, circuitous routes to find their way home, and being forced by police to line up like cattle to pay for tickets and board the trains. Despite the palpable tension and anger felt on such long lines, workers who spoke to the WSWs focused their anger on city and transit authority officials, not on the transit workers.

Waiting in line for the Long Island Railroad in Jamaica, Queens, Norman McLeod, a hospital worker and Vietnam War veteran, said, “Sure it’s inconvenient. But workers are being ripped off, and the transit workers are right to take a stand. How much more pressure from the corporations on the working people can we take?

“The MTA says it’s for the riders. But the last time they raised the fares, they said they had a deficit, and it turned out they were keeping two books and hiding a surplus. The media is trying to turn everything around and blame the strikers. Mayor Bloomberg, a billionaire, calls them selfish. But when the MTA meets, its board members arrive in stretch limos.

“It’s like a plutocracy here. From Reagan and the PATCO strike to today, they’ve transferred all the money into the hands of people who live like kings. Workers have to work two jobs, they can’t go to a play or a movie, they just have to keep working to live. That’s not human life. We have the potential to do a lot better.

“They want to take away decent pensions and keep younger workers from ever getting one. This is a trend everywhere, from the airlines to the auto industry. It’s just to keep profits as high as possible. At the same time, they’re waging a war in Iraq for Exxon and it’s getting worse than Vietnam.”

Cookie, a home health worker, expressed anger over how long it was taking to get to work but also sympathy with the strikers. “The media is unfair. These workers have families, too. If Bloomberg made more jobs and gave the workers the raises they deserve, they wouldn’t need to strike.

“I understand why they are fighting. Several years ago they cut our hours to prevent us from getting overtime pay. And if you don’t get a certain number of hours, you lose your medical benefits. We’re almost like day laborers. If there are no cases, then you don’t have a job. When you get a permanent job, you hope and pray that the elderly person doesn’t go into the hospital or die—because you’ll be out of work again.

“The transit workers are fighting for themselves and the generations coming behind them. I just wish they get what they’re asking for so the strike could be over.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact