

New York transit workers set up picket lines: “Today’s strike is for all working people”

A WSWWS reporting team
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Tens of thousands of New York City transit workers walked off the job Tuesday morning and set up picket lines at bus barns and train yards scattered throughout the city, shutting down operations that move some seven million passengers daily, the largest mass transit system in the US.

The strike, the first on the city’s subways and buses in 25 years, drew strong support not only from transit workers, but from working people throughout the city. The widespread backing for the strikers was in the teeth of a media barrage blaming the strikers, rather than the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and Mayor Michael Bloomberg, for the massive disruption to the city’s economic life. The city administration has estimated that losses from the walkout will total as much as \$400 million a day.

Both the administration of Bloomberg, a billionaire Republican, and the mass media have sought to portray the strikers as “greedy,” contrasting their salaries to those of the many impoverished New Yorkers who earn little more than the minimum wage. But many of these low-paid workers welcome the transit strike as a blow against the wealthy elite who dominate the city.

At sites in Brooklyn, Manhattan, the Bronx and Queens picketers chanted, “What do you want?... Respect!” and “No Contract... No work!” Among the strikers were immigrant workers drawn from virtually every part of the globe, including South Asia, East Asia, Latin America and the former Soviet Union. Workers marched in circles in the bitterly cold weather, with only the fires in oil barrels to warm them.

Massive traffic jams developed on every major artery leading into the city, demonstrating the indispensability of the transit workers. At many picket lines, passing motorists trying to find a way into the city honked their horns in support, drawing cheers from the strikers.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers on picket lines in Brooklyn, Manhattan and Queens.

“The offer that they made was unacceptable,” said Karl Boyer, a Queens bus driver with 17 years on the job. “You can’t even survive on what they are paying us now.”

Like many of the workers on the picket line outside the Corona, Queens bus barn, opposite Shea Stadium, he complained bitterly of management’s disciplinary abuse of employees and the continuous drive to boost productivity.

“A lot of the time, there are no bathrooms for bus drivers, and when there are, they don’t give you any time to use them,” he said. “You’ve got a lot of people walking around with prostate and kidney problems because of this job. They treat us like we’re machines.”

“We’re professionals, and we deserve respect. We are responsible for the people we carry and we get to work on time and get them to work on time. If we’re one minute late they send us home. The schedules, particularly for the younger workers, don’t even let you see your family. Half the guys out here have been married two or three times because of the stress this job places on marriages.”

“They say that we’re holding the city hostage, but we’re the ones who are the hostages under the Taylor Law. They sent three letters to my home threatening that if I struck I would be fined \$25,000 and two days’ pay for every day on the picket line.”

“We are just working people out here. We have families, and the economy has been going up like crazy, while they keep our salaries the same. They have given us no choice but to strike. Every agency, it seems, is out to destroy this union. We’re going to have to hold out as long as it takes.”

Arthur Somersall, also a Queens bus driver, was hired by the MTA in 1981, just after the last strike 25 years ago. “In the 24 years that I have been here, things have gotten a lot worse,” he said. “They are always trying to squeeze more work out of you. Now they have loop runs instead of one point to another, so you can’t get off the bus even to go to the bathroom.”

“They are also constantly looking to discipline people. If you write up three buses in a month for mechanical problems, they call you in to be questioned.”

“When I started on the job, the guys who had struck were hurting because of the fines. Now they want to fine us two days’ pay for every day out. But we can’t live with what they are giving us. The cost of living is rising and now they want to make us do co-pays for health care on top of everything else.”

Paul Moreau, who has 17 years driving a bus in Queens, told the WSWS, “We have bit the bullet too many times. We have had the Taylor Law hanging over our heads for so long, but this time they forced it on us.

“The thing that none of us could accept is the change in pension to make you work until you’re 62. As hard as this job is, you’re lucky to make it to 62. Five years after they retire, half the people have passed away. A lot of them are dying on the job. I have been to so many funerals for my co-workers that I have gotten tired of going.

“They are always asking and asking us for things, but when it comes to the 62 years pension—oh, no. We have got to take a stand and fight for what we need.

“When I hear Bloomberg and Kalikow talking about how we are selfish, it makes me so angry. We’re just asking for a salary that we can live on, something that neither of them could understand. They’re billionaires, but what is it they get paid for? They just take in the revenues, while we’re the ones doing the work.

“You hear the media talking about the \$63,000 bus driver, but I never see that money. By the time they take out taxes, Medicare, pension and everything else, you end up with about \$10 an hour.

“They call us militants, but as far as I can see they’re the militant ones. They want to be dictators, and when you dictate to people, this is what happens.”

“It’s like they spit in our face,” said Joe Townsend, a train operator on the East Side of Manhattan with four years at the MTA. “They say, ‘Look, we’ve got a billion dollar surplus, but screw you, you’re not getting any of it.’”

“Usually, they wait until after they’ve negotiated the contract and pled poverty to reveal that they have ‘found’ a few extra hundred million, and it’s barely reported by the media. This time, they got caught because the government has been investigating the use of the money.

“We’ve been pushed into this, but we had to fight. Every other worker in the city is going to face the same thing if we go down. They’ll screw everybody.

“They talk about us making so much money, but the real poverty line in New York for a family of four is about \$57,000. If you’re the only one working, like in my family, it’s not easy. This strike, coming in the middle of the holidays, is stressful. Then on top of that to be threatening fines and penalties. Where is the money going to come from?”

At the Coney Island Yard in Brooklyn, Jasper, a conductor with 23 years on the job, said, “I think this strike is for the entire working class against the attacks against us. They are trying to destroy all the good paying jobs. We need dignity, benefits and all the things that we have accomplished through decades of struggle by our parents and grandparents.

“Today’s strike is for all working people who are overlooked and treated with disrespect. We have to stop them from turning the clock back against us. This is not just a struggle for transit workers, but for all workers. Before I came here, I was in trucking and involved in a number of other strikes. The work we do makes this economy and makes it possible for the wealthy to obtain the riches they possess. So of course, the corporations that make such big profits use the media against us by trying to divide us and weaken us. They want to rob us, and stop us from having a decent income.”

Vincent Masci, a structure maintainer for the past 17 years, said, “I am against what I call the neo-Nazi neocons who are running this government. We are in this predicament because they are trying to keep workers down. They are attempting to increase the size of their wallets by reducing ours.

“They are making money and we are not. The people who are condemning us are the people who are making billions like Bloomberg. They make their wealth by keeping working people down. I am a structure maintainer and we mostly are concerned with keeping the transit system safe. We want to make sure people don’t fall and break their necks on the infrastructure.

“I am strongly against the Iraqi war. I wrote a letter to Hillary Clinton and she wrote back to tell me why she supports the war. We should never have been there. It’s a waste of human life for both the Iraqis and our troops. It is genocide.

“The Democratic Party is not with us anymore. They have become more conservative, more representative of the wealthy against the working man.”



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