

New York City transit workers defy threats and strike

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New York City's 34,000 bus and subway workers, defying threats of fines and imprisonment, walked off the job at 3:00 a.m. Tuesday morning after their union, Transport Workers Union Local 100, rejected the demands of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) for sweeping concessions on pensions, health care and working conditions.

The strike, the first to shut down the city's mass transit system in 25 years, pits transit workers in a direct confrontation not only with the MTA, but with the state and city governments, the Democratic and Republican parties, and New York's ruling establishment of Wall Street financiers and corporate CEOs.

It also pits them against the trade union bureaucracy. Demonstrating the treacherous role of the union hierarchy, the president of Local 100's parent union intervened after the breakdown of negotiations to urge that the MTA's takeaway offer be accepted and warn that the strike would receive no support from

the international union.

Under New York State's anti-labor Taylor Law, workers face the prospect of being fined two days' pay for every day on the picket line, while threats have been made to arrest union leaders and possibly striking workers themselves for defying a court injunction.

After the walkout, MTA Chairman Peter Kalikow said that he and the state's attorney general would go to court immediately seeking contempt rulings. The city administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg also indicated it would be in court seeking additional astronomical fines of \$25,000 the first day of the strike for each individual worker, to be doubled each day thereafter (as well as \$1 million against the union, similarly doubled each day).

The attitude taken by the city's ruling elite is akin to the reaction of a master to a slave revolt. It was summed up Tuesday morning in a *Daily News* editorial, which demanded, "The full weight of the law must swiftly be brought to bear on the Transport Workers Union for having the irresponsible lawlessness to shut down the transportation system that is New York's lifeblood... Jail [Transport Workers Union Local 100 President Roger] Toussaint and his bull-headed lieutenants. Impose fines on the TWU... large enough to bankrupt the union within days. Hit every transit worker who walks with a penalty of two days' pay for every day out... There can be no amnesty for those who have broken the law."

The walkout represents the biggest class confrontation in the US in a generation. The issues at stake are not peculiar to transport workers or public employees, but reflect the general drive to destroy wages, working conditions and benefits of workers throughout the economy, from the airlines to the auto industry.

This strike was by no means something the union bureaucracy wanted. It has been provoked by the MTA as part of a wider strategy to slash spending on public employee compensation. Within New York's ruling establishment, a conscious decision has been taken to make an example of the TWU.

On the part of transit workers, however, frustration over declining living standards in what is one of the world's most expensive cities and anger at systematic disciplinary abuse by the MTA have been joined by a deep-felt resistance to the agency's attempts to wipe out gains won by workers through decades of struggle.

The key issue that has forced the strike is management's demand for a roll-back of pension rights, forcing newly hired workers to stay on the job until age 62, instead of the current 55, before

collecting a pension. No similar demand for pension givebacks has been made against any other public employee union in the city, and the ultimatum has provoked particular anger among transit workers, whose life expectancy is among the lowest of any section of the workforce.

This confrontation has laid bare the immense class divide in New York City, the center of world finance capital. In the run-up to the walkout, the public has been subjected to the spectacle of various billionaires—from Michael Bloomberg, who bought his way into City Hall, to MTA Chairman Peter Kalikow, a prominent real estate mogul, to Rupert Murdoch, owner of the *New York Post*—denouncing workers who start at salaries of \$34,000 for their “greed.”

Bloomberg demanded that transit workers face a “new world” in which pensions and health care costs are to be paid by the workers themselves, so that the savings can be funneled into the immense profits and incomes of the social class that he personifies.

The clear aim is to take on and defeat a union that historically has the reputation of being the most militant in New York City. Within the financial aristocracy that rules New York, a decision has apparently been taken that the hardship that will be inflicted upon the public by a shutdown of the mass transit system is a price worth paying for making an example of the TWU that can then be used to force givebacks, including the destruction of benefits and wage cuts, throughout the labor movement.

Behind the scenes, New York’s Republican governor, George Pataki, has signaled that the MTA should take an uncompromising stand against the TWU. Pataki, who is launching a bid for the Republican presidential nomination, has apparently taken to heart the advice of the *Wall Street Journal* on how best to win the backing of the party’s big business backers and right-wing base. “If New York Governor George Pataki really has ambitions to run for President in 2008,” the *Journal* editorialized last week, “here’s a way he can demonstrate leadership to a national audience: Stand up to the transit workers union...”

Meanwhile, city and state Democratic politicians, a number of whom have been paraded before TWU membership meetings as “friends of labor,” have tacitly backed the strike-breaking, as in the case of US Senator Hillary Clinton, who declared herself “neutral” while reiterating her support for the Taylor Law, or have remained silent, like Fernando Ferrer, whom the union backed for mayor earlier this year.

Now that the strike has begun, workers in New York City and throughout the country must give it the widest and most active support possible. Even before the walkout, there were powerful indications that the transit workers’ struggle enjoys broad popular support. Unions at Metro North, which services New York’s northern suburbs in Westchester County as well as Connecticut, indicated they would honor picket lines and potentially shut down these commuter trains as well. Meanwhile, two organizations representing livery and yellow cabs said their members would not follow the city’s contingency plan for waiving restrictions on pick-ups and multiple fares.

“We won’t be scabs for the city,” said Bhairavi Desai, executive director of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance. “If this strike happens, we consider it more of a lockout than a strike, with the

way the MTA has conducted itself. We won’t participate in bringing down the wages of another work force.”

It is vital that in beginning this struggle, transit workers and the working class as a whole assimilate the lessons of the last New York City transit strike, which occurred in 1980. That strike had brought the city and state governments to the brink of capitulation, but was called off by the TWU Local 100 bureaucracy, then headed by John Lawe, precisely to rescue the Democratic politicians and tame the militancy of the rank and file. Workers paid the bitter price in the loss of close to a month’s pay. This must not be allowed to happen again.

For the working class generally, the betrayal of the New York transit strike set the stage for the breaking of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization less than a year later, a historic defeat that ushered in a wave of union-busting and wage-cutting that swept through basic industry and every section of the economy.

A defeat of New York transit workers today would have similar implications. The danger of such a defeat flows not so much from the aggressive drive by the MTA and the city and state governments as from the role of the TWU bureaucracy and its alliance with the Democratic Party.

Transit workers must act independently of the union and carry out the struggle the union bureaucracy has refused to conduct, to mobilize broader sections of the working class in New York, from unionized public employees to the low-paid immigrant workers, the unemployed and the youth in a common struggle against the policies of the financial elite. They must organize independent strike committees to conduct such a fight.

Mass demonstrations must be organized in defense of the transit workers and against any imposition of fines or other legal attacks against them, and immediate preparations be made for the calling of a general strike of workers in New York.

Above all, the success of the strike demands a political mobilization of the working class as a whole. The defeat of the attacks on wages, benefits and working conditions, as well as the gutting of public services in order to fund tax cuts for the rich and profits for stock and bond holders, can be achieved only through a break with the Democratic Party and the building of a new independent party representing working people, the vast majority of the population, and advancing a socialist program.

That party, which alone fights for the political independence of the working class, is the Socialist Equality Party. The SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site* will fight to win the broadest possible support for New York City transit workers.



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