

The sudden end of the New York transit strike: A preliminary assessment

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The sudden end of the three-day strike that shut down New York City's mass transit system has underscored both the enormous class tensions building up in America, the heart of world capitalism, and the deep-going crisis of leadership and perspective in the working class.

There is no point in denying the fact that the New York City transit workers have suffered a significant setback. Despite the immense impact of the strike on the city's economy, which was growing by the hour, the workers have been sent back to work by the Toussaint leadership of Transport Workers Union Local 100 without having realized any of their objectives. The fines imposed under the Taylor Law have not been rescinded.

Local 100, which represents the city's 34,000 bus and subway workers, ordered its members to take down their picket lines at bus depots and rail yards throughout New York and immediately return to work after an agreement to resume negotiations with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) was reached through state mediation.

The workers are going back without a contract, with no resolution of the central issue that provoked the strike—management's demand to attack pension rights of new employees—and no amnesty for strikers, who still face punishing fines for joining the walkout. In short, nothing has been resolved.

The news that the agreement had been brokered came at 11 a.m. as a New York State Supreme Court judge convened proceedings in a Brooklyn courtroom to rule on the jailing of union officials and the imposition of massive fines against individual strikers. These fines were to begin at \$25,000 on the first day, doubling for each day the walkout continued. These astronomical sums were requested by the city as a means of breaking the transit workers, forcing them to lose their homes and driving them into poverty.

State Supreme Court Justice Theodore Jones adjourned the case until January 20, declaring that he did not want the legal proceedings to interfere with negotiations.

Republican Governor George Pataki called a press conference to announce that penalties imposed under the state's anti-labor Taylor Law, which makes public employee strikes illegal,

would be enforced. The law calls for every striker to be docked two days' pay for every day on strike.

"There is a lesson to be learned from this," said Pataki, "No one is above the law. You break the law and the consequences are real. They cannot be waived."

Pataki's posturing as tough on labor is part of his bid for the Republican presidential nomination in 2008, a political factor that served to exacerbate the friction that produced the strike.

The two leading Republican candidates seeking to succeed him as New York governor both issued statements saying that they would have fired the strikers and replaced them with scab labor. They denounced the Democratic front-runner, Elliot Spitzer, the state's attorney general, for failing to make a similar demand.

Spitzer's spokesman responded to these attacks by pointing out that the attorney general had "obtained some of the strongest measures ever imposed and we continue to seek additional penalties. Our actions speak for themselves." These penalties included a \$1 million-a-day fine imposed against TWU Local 100.

There is every indication that the MTA, backed by the governor, the mayor and powerful sections of New York City's financial and corporate elite, deliberately provoked the strike with the aim of breaking the union and forcing through pension concessions which would then be used to roll back pension benefits more broadly in both the public and private sectors. The result was a shutdown that crippled much of the city's economy and, according to Mayor Michael Bloomberg's own estimates, will cost over \$1 billion.

The strike itself was a manifestation of the deep-seated anger and militancy that has been building up among the city's transit workers, who conducted their first strike in a quarter of a century. This anger, in turn, expresses broad sentiments in the working class as a whole in a city that boasts one of the world's greatest concentrations of billionaires and multi-millionaires, together with masses of underpaid workers, many of them immigrants drawn from every corner of the globe.

Like all major struggles, the transit strike served to clarify existing social relations. A billionaire mayor, who bought his election at over \$100 a vote, publicly denounced the workers as "greedy" and "thugs." The mass media chimed in, vilifying the

strikers and demanding the jailing of their leaders.

On the very day the media frenzy reached its peak, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article revealing that many of the millionaire CEOs based in New York City are not even paying taxes, as their companies pick up the tab. As a prominent financial adviser told the *Journal*, the practice is aimed at “removing taxes from the inevitable life experiences, leaving only death” for those at the top of the social ladder.

Notwithstanding their militancy, the transit workers were left isolated. This was not due to lack of popular support. Several polls have already shown that a significant majority of the population blamed the MTA for provoking the walkout and sympathized with the transit workers, despite the vicious media campaign against them. Rather, the workers were isolated by the venality of the trade union bureaucracy, both in the TWU—whose international president branded the strike illegal and unsanctioned and called upon workers to scab—and the whole of the so-called labor movement in New York City and nationally.

No attempt was made by the official labor leadership in New York City to mobilize the working class as a whole in support of the transit workers or to counter the grotesque lies of the media. Not a single leaflet was issued or demonstration organized by the other unions in defense of the strike, much less solidarity strike action to counter the savage state attacks. For its part, the national AFL-CIO maintained a stony silence. Like the ruling elite itself, the privileged labor bureaucrats reacted to the strike with fear and loathing.

The Local 100 leadership, headed by its president, Roger Toussaint, had no alternative perspective. It conducted the strike as a pure-and-simple trade union struggle under conditions in which the transit workers were confronting the full power of the state mobilized through the Taylor Law and the courts, which stood squarely behind the MTA and the city’s ruling elite. For all its militant rhetoric, the Toussaint leadership appeared entirely unprepared for the ferocity of the Bloomberg administration’s response to the strike.

It is likely that Toussaint had hoped certain sections of the Democratic Party apparatus in both the city and state would provide some degree of political cover for TWU Local 100. When this failed to materialize, Toussaint began looking for a way out of the confrontation.

Whatever his intentions, Toussaint’s dependence upon the Democratic Party was a fatal political flaw for which the striking transit workers have paid a heavy price. The so-called “friends of labor” that the local had cultivated over the past period did nothing whatsoever to defend the workers. New York’s Senator Hillary Clinton declared herself “neutral,” while reaffirming her support for the Taylor Law. Fernando Ferrer, whom Local 100 backed for mayor last month, was nowhere to be seen.

Finally, the local leadership lacked an alternative social-economic perspective that could rally broad sections of the

working class in New York in support of the transit workers. The fight against the Bloomberg administration was, in essence, a fight against capitalism. The economic logic of the existing economic system underlay Bloomberg’s demand, backed by Wall Street, that transit workers adapt themselves to a “new world” in which workers’ pensions and health benefits are slashed for the sake of private wealth and corporate profit.

This struggle has immense lessons for the entire working class. First, it has debunked all of the conceptions promoted by the media that the working class has ceased to exist, or that it does not want to fight. The transit walkout demonstrated the immense social weight of the working class and its great combativity.

Secondly, it has exposed the existing trade unions as hopelessly inadequate as instruments of social struggle. To the extent that these organizations are not actively engaged in the suppression of the working class—as in the case of the TWU international and the AFL-CIO as a whole—their lack of an alternative political, social and economic perspective and program leaves them defenseless against the attacks of the state. Dominated by a politically reactionary bureaucracy allied with the Democratic Party, they are inevitably transformed into means of imposing the demands of the ruling elite on the working class.

The strike of transit workers has demonstrated the urgent necessity for the development of a new socialist movement capable of uniting the working class on the basis of an uncompromising anti-capitalist political program. This is the movement that the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* are fighting to build.

It is impossible to conduct any serious struggle today without advancing a program for the transformation of society by placing the interests of working people, the vast majority of the population, above the drive for profit by the corporations and the financial oligarchy. This means the reorganization of economic life along socialist lines.

It is vital that the lessons of the confrontation in New York be drawn, not only by transit workers, but by every section of the working class. It is by no means the end of such struggles, but only the opening shot of what will be an increasingly broad and powerful movement of the American working class coming into confrontation with the capitalist system.



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