

New York City transit workers vote to authorize strike

Alan Whyte

12 December 2005

More than 6,000 transit workers voted Saturday to authorize a strike by Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, which represents 34,000 New York City bus and subway workers, unless a settlement is reached before the current contract expires at 11:59 p.m., Thursday, December 15. About 4,000 workers listened to the union leaders and other speakers at the mass membership meeting in Manhattan's Javits Center, while an overflow crowd of 2,000 more waited outside. After the speeches, union leaders held an impromptu rally for those who were unable to enter, shouting slogans such as "No contract, no work."

Speakers inside the center included representatives of the city's Central Labor Council and the union's sister transportation local, which recently ended a strike against mass transit in Philadelphia. A representative of the union that represents the workers for the commuter railroad Metro North complained that his members have been working without a new contract for three years. "Don't let this happen to you," he said.

The keynote speaker brought on by the Local 100 bureaucracy was Democratic politician Jesse Jackson, who gave one of his ritual performances consisting of empty rhetoric and feigned sympathy for the workers, while committing himself and his party to nothing.

He dodged the issue of supporting the transit workers' right to strike by declaring that the issue was one of the transit authority being compelled to "strike out" their attacks on job security. Much of his remarks consisted of leading workers in a call and response of such phrases as "job security is national security," "this land is your land" and, of course, his trademark "keep hope alive." No other Democratic Party politicians bothered to show up, including Senator Hillary Clinton, who is on record as supporting New York State's anti-strike Taylor Law and who once spoke at a mass

membership meeting, and Fernando Ferrer, whom the union supported in the recent election for mayor.

In his speech to the rally, TWU Local 100 President Roger Toussaint condemned the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's demand for unacceptable givebacks in return for a paltry 5 percent wage hike over two years. For example, instead of meeting the union's demands for improved pensions, he said, the MTA is demanding that the minimum retirement age for all new hires be raised to 62 instead of the current 55 that applies to most employees. The transit agency is also seeking huge cutbacks in sick benefits, such as higher co-payments for prescription drugs and office visits, and requiring new employees to pay 2 percent of their earnings toward health premiums, as opposed to the current practice of not having to pay anything. It is also demanding a reduction in the use of sick leave.

The MTA is determined to consolidate about 12 job titles. Toussaint specifically referred to the transit agency's attempt to have station agents perform cleaning duties and to introduce one-person train operation, known as OPTO, which would lead to removing conductors from trains, leaving only the train operators to perform the duties of moving the trains and opening and closing the doors.

He concluded by asserting that the union had three choices: accepting the MTA's demands, working without a new contract or voting to authorize a strike.

Before putting the third option before the membership, he referred to the recent tragic death of 34-year-old train operator Lewis Moore, who died while working as part of a two-person crew on a work train in the early morning hours of December 1. While it is not yet known what caused his death, it is clear that the transit supervision ordered the train taken seven stops out of its way before getting Moore off it, rather

than have it go to the nearest station and delay subway traffic. Moore died before he got to a hospital.

Toussaint pointed out that the transit authority will stop trains in passenger service if they discover a dog on the tracks, but they will not do the same to save the life of a transit employee.

The TWU president invoked Moore's death as a brutal example of how the MTA treats its workers before concluding the meeting with a strike authorization vote. He stated that if there is a strike it will be because the transit authority "thinks that a transit worker's life is worth less than a dog." While virtually all those in the hall stood up in favor of walkout, the meeting was organized to prevent any discussion from the members.

A number of workers at the rally spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the prospect of a transit strike.

John from the structure department said, "The MTA is playing games with us. We want good wages and health benefits. What they are offering us is not acceptable. We do not want to strike, but we will if we have to. They do not realize that the transit system is the employees. Without the employees, there is no system"

Anthony from the signal department said, "I have three daughters, a dog, a cat and a mortgage, and I need a decent wage. The TA's offer is stepping on all of us. They are demanding ridiculous givebacks on the pension and sick benefits. We want to be treated with dignity and respect. If we have to go out, then we have to do what we have to do."

Dominick, a station agent, said, "Their intention is to combine jobs. After the last contract, they closed stations, booths, and started one-worker trains. Since the 9/11 terrorist attack, they reduced jobs instead of adding jobs. There should be action with other unions. There is some talk of joining together with MetroNorth, but for union officials, talk is cheap."

Hendricks, a tile worker in the station department, said that "the major issue is money, but there is also a need for retirement and health benefits. The New Jersey and Long Island transit workers are making more than us. We want to be treated as equals. The TA is trying to play hardball, waiting to get the eleventh or twelfth hour, but I don't believe that the workers will put up with it. They are fed up. If we go out, we understand that we will hurt, but we have needs. I have a home to

pay for. You have to stand up."

On the eve of the meeting, Mayor Bloomberg stated his hope that the strike vote was merely a negotiating tactic. In his weekly radio program Friday, he stated, referring to the anticipated strike vote, "My hope is that all of this is posturing and a negotiating tactic, and when it comes to the deadline everybody will understand that they have to keep negotiating if they haven't come up with an agreement because a strike is, number one, illegal, and the penalties are very severe."

The mayor was referring to the state's Taylor Law, passed after the 1966 transit strike, under which workers lose two days' pay for every day on the picket line. This penalty was imposed after the 1980 strike that shut down the subway system for 11 days. In 2002, Bloomberg was seeking the renewal of an even more draconian injunction obtained in 1999 by his predecessor, Rudolph Giuliani, that would have imposed individual fines of \$25,000 a day on each worker, with the penalty doubling for every additional day on strike.

On Friday, the city's lawyer, Michael Cardozo, testified in State Supreme Court in favor of another injunction against the union. The MTA also went to court seeking an injunction, and a spokesman for the agency responded to the union's mass membership meeting by stating that "threatening an illegal strike or striking will not result in a contract."

Toussaint responded, "They shouldn't test us." However, he added that the local would need the authorization of the TWU international leadership in order to actually carry out a walkout.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact