

After rejecting MTA's "final offer"

New York City transit union calls selective strikes

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After continuing negotiations for four and a half hours after the expiration of its old contract, Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, representing 34,000 New York City bus and subway workers, declared on Friday morning that it had rejected what management described as its "final offer."

Local 100 President Roger Toussaint announced that the union would strike two small private bus lines that are about to be taken over by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). He said that the local's executive board had decided to delay a decision on a strike by the bulk of its membership employed directly by the MTA for four more days.

The MTA and the city administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg have threatened to retaliate against such a walkout with massive fines against the union as well as individual members, together with possible jailings of union officials and strikers. Because the two bus lines are still privately owned, their employees are not subject to New York state's anti-labor Taylor Law, which bars strikes by public employees.

The private bus line strike would involve little more than 700 workers in Queens, who have been working without a contract for three years. It did not begin Friday as originally anticipated, however, as union officials at the two companies told their members to continue working, with any walkout likely postponed until Monday.

Anger among transit workers has been fueled by both the intransigent and provocative negotiating stance of the transit authority as well as the threats of draconian punishment should they dare to strike. The city has demanded individual fines of \$25,000 a day against each individual striker, with these fines to be doubled

for every additional day on the picket line.

The deal declared by the MTA to be its "final offer" consisted of 3 percent raises in each of the next three years, a very slight increase over its original proposal of two 3 percent hikes over 27 months. It has continued, however, to demand the imposition of a two-tier structure on health care and pension benefits, something that the union has rejected as unacceptable. The offer called for new-hires to pay 1 percent of their earnings toward health care premiums and that they be forced to work until age 62—rather than the current age, 55—before collecting a pension.

"There is no more," declared MTA chairman Peter Kalikow, describing the proposed contract as the agency's "final offer." He said that the offer was "fair and at the limits of our financial ability." On Wednesday, less than 24 hours before the old union contract expired, Kalikow led the MTA board in approving a 2006 budget that disposed of a more than \$1 billion surplus by initiating several new programs, including holiday fare reductions, rather than allocating funds for the pay and benefits of employees.

Mayor Bloomberg, meanwhile, described the pact as "generous" and urged transit workers to accept it.

The bitter irony of these two billionaire Republicans—Kalikow is a real estate mogul, while Bloomberg's fortune was built on the financial information company bearing his name—describing a contract that would impose the most significant attacks on transit workers in 70 years as "fair" and "generous" was hardly lost on workers whose starting pay is barely \$35,000 a year.

Bloomberg, meanwhile, declared that if the walkout does take place next week, it "would be a lot worse"

than if a strike had begun Friday morning when the old contract expired. He signed an executive order Friday that would place the city under a state of emergency if the workers do shut down the transit system.

Meanwhile, both the union and the MTA indicated that they were prepared to continue negotiations over the weekend. The extension of the talks marks one of the longest periods ever that TWU members have worked beyond the expiration of their old contract. The union struck the system for 10 days in 1966 and for 11 days in 1980, the last such strike against the largest public transportation system in the US.

Among transit workers, the union leadership's tactical maneuver of calling out the small private line while keeping the vast bulk of the membership working at the MTA received a mixed reception. Many expressed the opinion that if any workers were going out on strike, they all should strike.

"Toussaint should have struck," a train operator at the Stillwell station in Brooklyn told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "A deadline is a deadline." He said that as far as he and many of his fellow workers were concerned, a strike would have to be called if the MTA persisted in its demand to roll back pension gains for new employees. "We shouldn't give up our unborn," he said. "They won't survive this job until they're 62 years old."



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