

Union leader jailed for New York City transit strike

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Transport Workers Union Local 100 President Roger Toussaint was jailed in New York City Monday, after a Brooklyn Supreme Court judge sentenced him to 10 days imprisonment and fined the union local \$2.5 million for carrying out the 60-hour strike last December.

The jailing of Toussaint, along with the imposition of massive fines against the 34,000 TWU members who participated in the walkout, was demanded by New York's economic and political elite as an object lesson to transit workers who dared to resist the assault on their living standards.

Brooklyn Supreme Court Judge Theodore T. Jones also fined Local 100 \$2.5 million and indefinitely suspended automatic dues check-off from workers' paychecks. The latter will result in the loss of as much as \$1.6 million a month, a shortfall that would essentially bankrupt the local. The judge issued the penalties under New York State's anti-labor Taylor Law, which makes it illegal for public employees to strike.

Nearly 1,500 transit workers and their supporters rallied in front of the state Supreme Court Building in Brooklyn and marched with Toussaint across the Brooklyn Bridge to the "Tombs" jail in lower Manhattan. Workers attending the rally were outraged at the sentence, which they rightly saw as an attack on all TWU members and the working class as a whole.

But rather than mobilize this feeling in a conscious political struggle against the strikebreaking efforts of New York's Republican and Democratic politicians, the assorted trade union bureaucrats who addressed the rally sought to block workers from drawing any lessons from this bitter experience.

The transit workers enjoyed widespread public support from working people throughout the city, who have suffered years of declining living standards while Wall Street financiers and corporate executives have enjoyed an orgy of wealth. The strike quickly turned into a confrontation with the city's billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg and the entire political and media establishment, which denounced

the transit workers as "selfish thugs" who cared little about the working class and low-wage workers who used the transit system.

Rather than mount a powerful counter-offensive to mobilize the working class in defense of the strike, Toussaint appealed to other city unions and the Democratic Party to pressure the transit authority into a deal. This miserable perspective produced nothing, as, behind the scenes, top city labor officials pressured the TWU to call off the strike and leading Democrats such as US Senator Hillary Clinton made clear where they stood by upholding the Taylor Law. Without any serious perspective to mount a struggle against the city's corporate and political elite, Toussaint capitulated and called off the strike after two-and-a-half days, leaving the union and members subject to massive fines and repression.

At Monday's rally, many of the union officials making speeches about labor solidarity were the same ones who abandoned the transit workers and pressured Toussaint to call off the strike. Behind the labor bureaucrats were various Democrats from the New York City Council who did nothing to defend the transit workers but were anxious to get in front of the cameras to display their pro-labor credentials.

Angered by the suppression of their strike, union members last January voted by a narrow margin to reject an offer by the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), which dropped demands for pension cutbacks but would have required workers to pay for health-care benefits for the first time on a sliding scale adjusted to the market.

Two weeks ago Toussaint engineered another vote on the same offer. This time, the proposed contract passed. The MTA, however, said it was no longer making the offer and would seek even more drastic concessions through binding arbitration, a process that would deny workers the right to ratify any contract. Barry Feinstein, a former Teamsters union leader who now sits on the MTA board, said, "There is nothing on the table to ratify," adding that binding arbitration was the only way to end the dispute.

There was clearly a conscious strategy from the podium of

Monday's rally. In order to cover up the collaboration of Toussaint and the local's leadership, a cult of personality was invented for the afternoon. While occasional jabs were taken at the Taylor Law, the tenor of the meeting was that a great man was now going to jail in the manner of Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

Some in the audience, which included teachers, carpenters, office workers and sheet-metal workers, could be heard muttering, "They're making him into a martyr." But not to worry. The head of the jail guards' union, Norman Seabrook, promised the audience that Toussaint would not suffer at the hands of his members.

Over the last several days, the New York media has made many comparisons of Toussaint's jail term with that of his predecessor, Michael J. Quill, and nine other union leaders during the 12-day transit strike of 1966. Such comparisons are fallacious. When ordered by a judge to end the strike Quill defied the court and famously said, "May the judge drop dead in his black robes." Moreover, in 1966 transit workers won significant wage increases from the transit authority.

The 2005 strike, on the other hand, was a defeat for the transit workers. Although the conditions existed to mount a powerful struggle of the entire working class, the strike was betrayed by the TWU leadership and New York City labor bureaucracy, which, along with its Democratic Party allies, agrees that working people must pay for the financial and social crisis of American capitalism.

Toussaint's decision to turn himself over to the New York authorities—well in advance of the 30-day deadline to do so—was a calculated act. Toussaint hopes that by going to jail—on the eve of a meeting of the MTA board—his act will generate enough publicity and sympathy to somehow pressure the board to accept the concessions contract ratified by the union. Board member Feinstein responded to this effort, saying, "This is little or no value in locking up a labor leader—it inflames people." He added, however, "it does not increase the pressure on us."

The attempt to cast Toussaint as a public martyr is also aimed at covering up his own role and that of other dissident factions within the TWU who have failed to offer any real alternative to their predecessors. In the end, like the previous leaders of the TWU, their subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party has produced nothing but disaster.

It is likewise aimed at restoring some credibility to the union leadership among its own members, who have seen their paychecks slashed as a penalty for joining the strike. Many workers have protested that they are being fined even more than the two days for every day on the picket line called for by the Taylor Law, and that the union has taken no action to defend them.

In a statement on Toussaint's jailing, Bill Van Auken, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for US Senate from New York, noted:

"As for the Local 100 leadership, lacking any social-economic perspective capable of rallying broad layers of working people in New York behind the transit workers and relying instead on Democrats like Spitzer and Clinton to come to their aid, it ended up calling off the strike, forcing workers to vote on a concessions contract until they 'got it right', and it is likely to end up with something even worse through binding arbitration.

"It is impossible to wage a serious struggle, defend past gains or advance the interests of transit workers or any other section of the working class outside of a new political strategy based on the fight for the political independence of the working class and for an explicit and uncompromising anti-capitalist program that places the needs and interests of working people above the financial oligarchy's drive for profit. This means the struggle to reorganize economic life along socialist lines."

Supporters of the WSWs distributed hundreds of copies of Van Auken's statement at Monday's rally. Many workers were disturbed to hear that their union had given campaign funds to such open supporters of the Taylor Law as Hillary Clinton. One transit worker, T S. Smith, a cleaner, told the WSWs: "The union leaders figure that the Democrats will help them in some little way. But the gist of the Democrats is that they support the Republicans. They wanted to go to war in Iraq and the taxpayers are footing the bill. That's me, a taxpayer paying for that war. Hillary Clinton is against us, too. We need a new leadership that will say to her: 'Your agenda is not our agenda.' I'm not even going to talk about the gang at Enron, and executives like that, who get their huge severance packages. Something's got to give."



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