

New York City transit workers meet as contract deadline looms

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Thousands of New York City bus and subway workers attended the annual general membership meeting of Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 in Manhattan last Saturday to hear a report on the status of ongoing contract negotiations. The current pact is set to expire on January 15.

While many of those attending the meeting expressed anger over the relentless attacks that have been waged upon their jobs, wages and working conditions, the TWU Local 100 leadership gave no indication that it is prepared to lead any struggle.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), the state agency that employs the city's 36,000 transit workers, has established from the start of negotiations last month that it is seeking to impose an outright wage freeze or ensure any minimal wage hike is paid for through takeaways in benefits together with increased productivity through changes in work rules over the next three years.

The negotiations for the transit agency are being headed by Joseph Lhota, a right-wing Republican who was recently appointed by Democratic governor Andrew Cuomo as MTA chairman (see "New York governor picks right-wing Republican to head transit agency").

Using the threat of mass layoffs and with the complicity of the leaderships of the two main state employee unions—the Civil Service Employees Association and the Public Employees Federation—Cuomo has already succeeded in imposing contracts containing multi-year wage freezes and other givebacks on state workers.

Cuomo picked Lhota on the eve of the contract negotiations to impose similar concessions upon transit workers as part of the Democratic governors' strategy to make the working class pay for the state's \$10 billion budget deficit through cutbacks in public employee jobs, wages and benefits, as well as sharp reductions in state services. Lhota's principal qualification for the job is his experience as deputy mayor under New York City's former Republican mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, playing a major role in the city's move in 1999 to obtain a court order threatening transit workers with astronomical monetary fines if they went out on strike or even discussed it.

In his presentation to the membership meeting, John Samuelsen, the president of TWU Local 100, discussed the financial crisis of the MTA. He stated that the authority now has a long-term \$30 billion debt, and that 16 percent of the operating budget goes to servicing this debt. He also asserted that the transit agency's labor costs have been reduced from 73 percent of the budget in 2003 to a current 53 percent.

Though the union president claimed that the takeaway settlements

imposed by Cuomo on the two state unions did not set a pattern for transit workers, he presented no proposal to mobilize transit workers to avoid the same fate.

Significantly, the union did not use the meeting to hold a traditional strike authorization vote, and Samuelsen asserted that Local 100's executive board had decided that the January 15 contract expiration date is not to be regarded as a "hard and fast" deadline. While stating that he does not want to go to binding arbitration at this point, he indicated that the union leadership is prepared to accept binding arbitration at some time after the deadline.

The transit workers, among the most powerful sections of the New York City working class, last struck in December 2005. Local 100, then led by Roger Toussaint, who has since been awarded a vice-presidency in the TWU national union, was forced to call the strike by the militancy of the rank-and-file workers.

Though the strike successfully shut down the subway and bus system, effectively bringing the city to a halt and winning widespread popular support, it was deliberately isolated and betrayed by the unions and called off within three days. Rank-and-file workers were left to pay thousands of dollars in individual fines, while the union was hit with a \$2.5 million fine and the loss of its dues check-off.

Also speaking from the dais Saturday was Harry Lombardi, the executive vice president of the national TWU. He sought to adopt a militant pose, telling the assembled workers that "the bastards on Wall Street" have started class warfare. However, neither he nor anyone from the Local 100 leadership bothered to explain why the TWU national union locked arms with these same "bastards" in 2005, openly scabbing on the strike and going to court to argue that the walkout was illegal.

Another speaker was a representative of the Communications Workers of America who condemned the bankers for causing the current crisis and referred to the fact that the telephone company Verizon made more than \$22 billion in profits. He did not explain, however, why his union called off a two-week strike against Verizon, sending workers back to work without a settlement.

Samuelsen made a brief reference in his remarks to the Occupy Wall Street protest that was broken up by the administration of New York's billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg and the New York City Police Department last month. Local 100 was one of the first major unions to officially endorse the protest. The union bureaucracy did so not out any desire to carry forward a struggle against social inequality, but rather in an attempt to give itself a "left" cover as it prepares to betray rank-and-file transit workers in the current contract negotiations.

Like other unions, Local 100 sought to bring the protest under the wing of the Democratic Party, whose elected officials have been responsible for unleashing repression against the occupy movement around the country. At a union-backed rally in October, Samuelson voiced the position that Occupy Wall Street should direct its energies to the re-election of Barack Obama.

Through its subordination to the Democratic Party, the present union setup functions as an integral part of the profit system and is incapable of opposing government policies set by Wall Street and big business. As the bitter experience of the 2005 strike demonstrated, transit workers can carry forward a successful struggle only by organizing themselves independently of the union, establishing rank-and-file committees and fighting to mobilize every section of the working class, the students and the youth behind them in a political struggle against the Cuomo and Obama administrations and the profit system that they defend.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of transit workers attending Saturday's membership meeting.

Sherlon Hamilton, who works in car and vehicle maintenance, was adamant going into the meeting. "We cannot accept a freeze," he said. "No other section of city workers has accepted a freeze. Why should we? We cannot accept 2, 2 and 2. We are not accepting zero. We are not accepting 2 percent, 2 percent and 2 percent over three years. We will accept nothing less than 11 percent over three years. The cost of living has gone up. The rent is up. Cars are up. Are transit workers going to lose our houses? No.

"The MTA has money. They waste the money. Every time our contract comes up, they start crying they are broke. Ridership is up, the fares keep going up, if they are broke it is not our fault."

Joe, an older transit worker, added some perspective. "What do they mean trying to impose a three-year wage freeze contract on us? This is a sellout contract. How can they attempt to freeze our wages when we are indispensable to the wealth produced in every industry in this city? Take the trillion-dollar real estate industry that has made so many rich. Where would that industry be if people couldn't travel from any area of the region to Manhattan with mass transit? Or how about the tourist industry? How could it survive or make the money it does without us providing public transportation? They couldn't. We are vital to all the industries of the city that a few people are getting rich from. They are trying to freeze our pay, but nothing in the city runs without the work we do.

"This is a sellout contract. It is basically related to the war economy. There are trillions of dollars spent on war in this country, but there is no money for the states or the cities. So Wall Street is going to take it from us.

"During the Vietnam war, they had a wage freeze against workers across the country. No one gets a wage increase higher than that because they had to pay for the war. Both political parties stand for the same thing. Whether they are Democrats or Republicans, they stand for wars, for the rich and against the working people.

"Today, workers all over the country are hurting. Today, workers are in a fighting mood. Occupy Wall Street shows this. The same thing that happened back then may happen again in breaking up these wage freeze demands. It may just take a spark that we light here.

"I know the union leadership is not even asking for a strike vote here.

But most strike votes in the past have been initiated by the rank-and-file, and the leaders fall in line.

"I see Occupy Wall Street as very militant. They protested at the company that produces tear gas. They have been uniting with various labor groups. I especially like what happened in Oakland, where they called for a general strike a few weeks ago. I heard tens of thousands of workers came out, and they closed down the city and the port.

"Both political parties represent the same ruling class. But one thing they are trying to do now is co-opt the Occupy Wall Street movement into the Democratic Party to support Obama. The arrests at Occupy Wall Street have been widespread, and the mayors have driven them out of the parks in almost all the major cities. But the Democrats don't want to lean too hard on them because they want to bring them around to support them in 2012."

Alonso Butler works in a bus depot and represents a section of workers there. He said: "We just want a moderate increase in wages above the cost of inflation. The cost of living is going up. We have to keep up with this. We still have kids who need to go to college and need to go to see doctors. Because we work for it, we have a right to a good living wage, and good, safe working conditions.

"Then they are talking about us having to pay \$6,000 a year for our medical coverage. This amounts to taking \$250 out of every one of our paychecks. It takes away \$500 a month from us. We can't allow this, but this is what they want. We would be handing over millions to them.

"In this contract, they are also trying to get rid of the subway conductors. Not a lot of people know this, and it is in another division, but we are not going to allow that.

"No one is even talking about the dangerous working conditions where workers are at high risk of upper respiratory disease on their jobs. We drive buses in the more unregulated fumes, emissions and pollution of the city that will cause early disease or death to an untold number of workers. We also work downstairs in the depots cleaning and maintaining the vehicles. Here, the fumes and chemicals the car cleaners and maintainers have to work around are often enclosed. You begin to see the effects of all these poisons on the high incidence of health problems. A lot of the depots don't even have a decent sink to wash in when workers really need a shower. There are no uniforms or proper protection for track workers and the subway track cleaners. They have to wear their own clothes to work in. These are unsafe and health endangering working conditions.

"Most of the bus drivers who were laid off in the last few years have gotten jobs back, but many are no longer protected by civil service rights. There are divisions among bus drivers between MTA, the Manhattan and Bronx system, the private lines and the Queens and Staten Island system, which is organized by the ATU. Most of the drivers who have been rehired are not in the civil service system anymore.

"They have also laid off hundreds of station booth workers because they say a security camera someplace in the station is just as good. This is nonsense.

"There are other cuts in this contract they haven't provided details on yet, like the pensions."

Eddie Agard is a bus driver and shop steward. He declared, "I think the MTA is getting up in their right-wing agenda. The people of the transit union will not stand for it. We are for a living wage and a wage increase.

We have a right to this.

“They have become emboldened by the Wisconsin and Ohio fiascos, and they are trying to take a whole lot away from us. Somebody has to hold the line. There has to be some place that will stand and stop the attacks on working people. Nobody else is doing anything. We have to take a stand.

“I think what is going to happen is that we all are going to have to get together. Everyone in this city has to get together and let New York City and Albany know we won't stand for these takeaways. I think transit workers have to be very careful now about what politician they support. Certainly Cuomo and Bloomberg haven't done anything for us.”



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