

New York transit agency demands draconian worker givebacks

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The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) formally presented its concessions demands this week, only days before the contract deadline for some 35,000 bus and subway workers in New York City.

The transit agency is insisting on a three-year wage freeze along with a host of other major concessions. The givebacks include the elimination of the guaranteed 40-hour work week, with the introduction of part-time bus operators. A proposal to approximately double the amount workers pay for their health care coverage would be the equivalent of a huge pay cut.

Other MTA demands include reduced vacation days for new-hires, a cut in night differential pay, the broadbanding of job titles in order to increase productivity, a dramatic cut in pay for newly hired transit cleaners, changes in overtime rules that would cut overtime pay, and new disciplinary rules to discourage the use of sick time.

The aim of the transit agency is to make the concessions contracts imposed on New York State employees last summer the pattern for transit workers. The workers, members of Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, are currently ending a three-year agreement that included 11.3 percent in wage increases awarded by an arbitration panel. This award followed the general pattern set in other city workers' negotiations. Since then, however, the financial collapse has been followed by endless demands for austerity, with public employees targeted in states and municipalities across the US.

The New York negotiations are part of a national pattern in which the corporate and political

establishment is seeking to claw back gains won by workers over the past three-quarters of a century. A concessions contract imposed on transit workers will become the pattern for other city employees who face deadlines of their own this year. Other state and big city administrations will also be looking at the outcome of this contract to step up their own attacks on wages and working conditions.

It was New York's Democratic governor, Andrew Cuomo, using the threat of layoffs and the collaboration of the union leaders, who imposed concessions contracts last year on tens of thousands of state employees, members of the Civil Service Employees Association and the Public Employees Federation. Cuomo then underscored the bipartisan character of the attack on public service workers by appointing Joseph J. Lhota to head the MTA last fall.

Lhota is a Republican veteran of the administration of former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. He was budget director and deputy mayor under Giuliani in 1999, when transit workers were threatened with severe penalties if they even discussed job action.

The TWU Local 100 leadership has indicated, in the days and weeks leading up to the contract deadline, that it will do nothing to seriously resist the concessions demands, let alone fight for genuine improvements for transit workers and for the transit system as a whole.

Local 100 President John Samuelson told the annual mass membership meeting in December that the January 15 contract date was not "a hard, fast deadline." The union refused to hold a strike authorization vote as it had traditionally done in the

past.

The role of the union leadership was indicated this week by an authoritative online voice of big business, *crain's new york business.com*. The Internet publication wrote: "... though the two sides remain far apart, a strike like the one that crippled the city in 2005 is unlikely." It continued: "Budding respect between Mr. Samuelsen and Mr. Lhota, and the union's recognition of the MTA's financial predicament, suggest that the two sides will find a way to work together. Few expect a deal can be struck by the deadline on Jan. 15, but the union has said it will break from past practice and work without a contract, if need be."

This clearly sums up the role of the Local 100 leadership, which it shares in common with every other section of the union bureaucracy. Tied to the Democratic Party and beginning not with the needs of the transit workers, but rather the "financial predicament" that has been produced by the Wall Street crisis, Samuelsen is pledging in advance to subordinate the interests of the membership to that of the financial and corporate elite.

This also shows the emptiness of the union's claim to support last fall's Occupy Wall Street movement. Samuelsen saw the protests as an opportunity to give himself a "left" image. Behind the scenes, all of the city unions were glad to see the eviction of the Occupy encampment last November, lest it complicate their efforts to negotiate rotten deals for hospital workers, janitors and now transit workers.

TWU Local 100 has gone so far as to call its scheduled rally for Sunday, January 15 outside the midtown Manhattan hotel where negotiations are taking place "Occupy the Contract," as if this label will fool many workers.

The battle facing New York's transit workers, like that of every section of the working class, demands above all a new political strategy. A genuine struggle against the regime of permanent austerity alongside growing inequality can only be waged independently of and in opposition to the union defenders of the profit

system, breaking with the twin parties of big business and uniting the working class in its own mass political party fighting for a socialist program.



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