

New York City transit contract expires without a strike

Alan Whyte
17 January 2012

Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, representing about 35,000 New York City bus and subway workers, refused to call a job action after the union and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) failed to reach an agreement by the time the existing contract expired at midnight Sunday.

While the talks are taking place behind closed doors, the transit agency, after the deadline had passed, issued a statement affirming that the MTA and the union “remain far apart”.

Formal negotiations began only about a week ago, when the transit authority demanded either a wage freeze or productivity increases that would pay for any pay hike. The MTA is also seeking a whole gamut of other major concessions designed to dramatically reduce labor costs and the living standards of transit workers.

These concessions include the elimination of the guaranteed 40-hour week by introducing part-time workers and a dramatic increase in what workers pay for their health benefits, resulting in a huge pay cut. In addition, the MTA is demanding changes as to how overtime is calculated to reduce overtime pay, reduction of night differential pay, more disciplinary rules for the use of sick time, the broad-banding of job titles in order to increase productivity, a dramatic reduction in pay for newly hired transit cleaners and a reduction in vacation time for new hires.

The union leadership had already made it clear that it has no intention of calling a strike. At the a general membership meeting last month, TWU local 100 president John Samuelson reported that the union’s executive board had already voted that the January 15 contract expiration did not represent “a hard, fast deadline”. The union leadership also refused to hold a strike authorization vote as it has done in the past.

Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo has made it clear that he expects transit workers to accept a wage freeze similar to the one he imposed on state workers last year.

He said Monday, “... the contracts we negotiated with our public employees, where the public employees acknowledged that there is a terrible financial problem in this state and I believe quite appropriately and I applaud them for it, executed contracts with no raises...I think it is a powerful message and other unions should look at it and learn from it.”

Cuomo was able, with the collaboration of the leaderships of two state employees unions, to obtain multi-year wage freezes covering tens of thousands of state employees, by threatening them with massive layoffs.

The governor also made it clear that he expects Joseph Lhota, whom he recently appointed as the chairman of the MTA, to lead the assault on transit workers’ jobs and income. Cuomo described Lhota as “... a

very capable individual who is recently on the job but has tremendous experience in public service and issues like this, and I’ll leave it to him and I hope they work it out one way or the other.”

Lhota is a right-wing politician who was budget director and deputy mayor under former Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani (who was endorsed by the TWU local 100 leadership). In December 1999, while running City Hall, Giuliani and Lhota threatened transit workers with astronomical fines if they went on strike or even discussed a job action.

Samuelson, the Local 100 president, has won praise from the right-wing tabloid media for failing to invoke the union’s historic principle of “no contract, no work”, which has also been ignored by previous union leaders.

The *Daily News* published a fawning editorial entitled “Keep ‘em rolling, John”, which lauded Samuelson after he “wisely gave the union’s no-contract, no-work ethos a breather,” while insisting that, “There is no doubting his labor militancy.” It favorably contrasted his “more rational approach” to the decision of the previous union leadership in 2005 to conduct an abortive strike.

At that time, the *News*, owned by multimillionaire Mortimer Zuckerman, suggested that commuters “hurl” then Local 100 President Roger Toussaint off the Brooklyn Bridge. After being jailed briefly, Toussaint called off the three-day walkout, sending workers back to work to face punishing fines under the state’s anti-union Taylor Law and ultimately imposed a takeaway contract over the opposition of the membership.

TWU Local 100, like other unions, is determined to prevent any struggle that could bring masses of workers into confrontation with the super-rich elite, headed by billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg, that runs New York City. Samuelson instead peddles the illusion that workers can rely on the union’s alliance with the Democratic Party. During the Occupy Wall Street protests, he urged protesters to get behind Obama’s re-election campaign, and the union strongly backed Cuomo, who is now dictating sweeping cutbacks for transit workers and all public employees.

This rotten alliance was on display at a Sunday night rally outside the Sheraton Hotel in Midtown Manhattan, the site of the negotiations. A parade of Democratic politicians was brought before the sparsely attended demonstration, including former New York Democratic mayoral candidate Bill Thompson, and his successor as city comptroller, John Liu, who is considered a likely candidate to succeed Bloomberg, despite facing multiple campaign finance corruption investigations.

In his own remarks from the platform, Samuelson made demagogic promises to tell Cuomo and Lhota to “shove” their concessions

demands, but made no mention of the fact that the union was telling workers to stay on the job, despite the contract's expiration.

Among the several hundred rank-and-file workers who turned out for the rally, a number expressed deep-seated anger over the conditions that they face on the job and a determination to fight back.

Eze Chisholm, a transit ironworker, told the WSWS, "The MTA's demand that we pay 11 percent of our medical coverage and other things like the overtime pay changes are outrageous. To get overtime under the new MTA demands, you have to get over 40 hours in a week. Now you get time and a half overtime if they work you over eight hours in a day. These are things that we fought for and won in the past. Instead of going forward, we are going backward.

"The MTA says it is broke every time our contract comes up. They always have a money problem. But the cost of living keeps going up for us. Every time you look around things are going up, not by a few cents but by dollars, and they don't want to give you a raise.

"In the last strike we had, we didn't do so well. So some of the workers I spoke to were not in favor of a strike at this time. However, striking is one of the union's strong points. In order to get anything the strike is your weapon. If they don't want to give it freely, you have to fight for it."

Valerie Horton is a CTA (cleaner) in the maintenance division with almost 13 years of service. She denounced the takeaway demands explaining, "They shouldn't take away anything. If anything, they should be adding to what we have now. They should add to the medical coverage we have, but we now pay 1.5 percent of the insurance cost and they are demanding we pay over 10 percent. We should get a raise. We should put the no-layoff clause back in the contract. The union leaders and the MTA took it out of a contract when we didn't know they were taking it out. But because they took it out there have been thousands of layoffs.

"I am not in favor of a strike right now because we lost a lot of money in the last strike. I was in favor of the last strike, but I had to pay a \$1,300 Taylor law fine. And we ended up getting nothing at the end of the strike. Maybe I will be in favor of a strike a little later.

"Our medical coverage is bad now. I was on welfare 14 years ago, and I think the people on welfare get better medical coverage than we do. Our United Health Care insurance sucks. Now they want us to pay more for the high option insurance. They want us to be paying \$200 to \$300 more for any medical coverage every pay period. If you choose the higher Blue Cross/Blue Shield option you will be paying even more when the medical coverage still sucks.

"The CTA is a very dangerous job. One time I ingested chemicals on the job. I became very sick and thought I was going to die. But anytime you work around chemicals, particularly in an enclosed space, it is dangerous. Whether it is immediately or down the road, your health is jeopardized.

"I have to mix chemicals when I clean. I have to mix chemicals when I strip and wax the floors, and when I paint. The MTA shouldn't dispute whether these are dangerous conditions, they should just give us our medical coverage.

"I am also very much against the two-tier wage system for cleaners where they want to pay the new cleaners less than we make. If they lower the wages of the new cleaners, they will be lowering the wages of old cleaners soon enough. In addition, this makes for bad working conditions. It causes friction among workers, and it causes favoritism. A cleaner recently complained to me that right now Brooklyn cleaners are making more than cleaners in Staten Island. It is unfair and will

cause problems. I am against it.

"It seems like all of the problems are put on the backs of the working class. It has been this way for years. The working class are the ones who get up and go to work every morning. We are the part of the working class who make sure they can get to work each morning. The MTA and Mayor Bloomberg have no respect for us. Mayor Bloomberg tried to scar our reputation during the last strike when he called us thugs. According to him, it is the thugs who move the city.

"I don't think too much of Governor Cuomo either since he says one thing and then does another. Any changes he has made have not helped the working class. It just helps the government. He is just like Mayor Bloomberg.

"You believe the Democrats because you want to believe them. They take us as vulnerable people who want to believe and can get suckered into believing in them. We are vulnerable because we believe in equality and justice, and they rope us in. We vote for them. Then they get into office and do the opposite. Then it is too late. I say it is time to move on.

"The working class should have its own party that cares for the working class. It is the working class who keeps the economy going. Somebody has to put a stop to these attacks.

"I said this would be like a third world country if they keep up these attacks. There will be just the rich and the homeless. They are trying to destroy the whole working class and the public services in this city. We have to keep fighting and not give up."

Ray Smith, a bus operator, said: "They are talking about givebacks for medical benefits, but not offering anything. It would affect me. I have a family of seven, with five children to take care of. The MTA should contribute more to medical. They are talking about bus operators becoming part time. My family relies on me working a 40-hour week.

"People are getting tired of this. I think the part-time operator is a done deal. There is an economic crisis, and the MTA is saving money by cuts. It is a constant, uphill battle."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact