

New York City transit workers go six months without a contract

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New York City bus and subway workers have been working without a contract since the last arbitrators' award with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) expired on January 15 of this year.

Transport Workers Union local 100, which bargains for about 34,000 workers, has fully repudiated the principle of "no contract, no work," that it previously claimed to uphold. Last January, the union leadership refused even to hold a strike vote when the old pact expired.

In a recent statement, the union made it clear that the initiative has been surrendered entirely to the MTA to press for sweeping concessions. "The MTA continues to insist on a three-year wage freeze and other givebacks, especially in health care," the union wrote.

A wage freeze precedent was established last year when New York State's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, in collaboration with two state civil service unions, used the threat of layoffs to force state workers to accept a contract with no wage hikes.

Cuomo appointed Joseph Lhota, a right-wing Republican, as MTA chairman, assigning him the task of imposing a similar multi-year wage freeze on transit workers. In an attempt to blame workers for the fiscal crisis, Lhota testified before the New York State senate last month, claiming that while the agency was able to cut \$700 million in expenses, it was burdened with high employee pension and health care costs. He also claimed that the agency would be compelled to seek a fare hike in 2013 because of these expenses.

More recently, Lhota wrote a piece for the *New York Post* in which he maintained that since riders had suffered a combination of fare hikes and service cuts, "Now it's time for labor [transit workers] to be part of the solution [sacrifice]."

Of course, the wealthy bankers and financial traders who brought on the economic crisis are never asked to be "part of the solution." Quite the contrary, they are supposed to enjoy their million-dollar bonuses while working people suffer ever-greater hardships. The job of well-paid representatives of the political establishment like Lhota is to do everything in their power to pit the riding workers and students against the transit

workers.

The union leadership refuses to mobilize for any job action, much less a genuine fight to unite with other workers in New York, such as the locked-out Con Ed workers, who are suffering the same attacks on their living standards created by the economic crisis that began in 2008.

Instead of waging such a struggle, the union has engaged in a toothless campaign dubbed Money Thrown Away (MTA), in which it seeks to find areas where the agency has been wasting money, such as the sums it spends on derivatives that are only enriching the banks. It maintains that if the MTA would simply use its resources more intelligently, it could both pay for a decent contract and restore the services that it had previously cut.

This PR effort glosses over the real situation. The MTA has a long-term debt of more than \$32 billion. According to a report issued by the Citizens Budget Commission (CBC) in May, the debt will grow to \$39 billion by 2015. Currently, the authority owes \$2.1 billion in debt service for the current year, which is expected to rise to \$2.6 billion in 2015. Almost a third of all fare and toll revenues goes to paying for all this debt.

In a City Council hearing held this past March, MTA representatives said that the money that the agency obtains from various taxes has been falling short of projections, and therefore it will have to raise fares and tolls by 7.5 percent in January 2013, and then impose further increases two years later.

The CBC calculates that even with these fare hikes, the percentage of money that goes to paying the debt will remain the same. In other words, riders are being forced to pay more for less safe service in order to offset the transit authority's increasing amounts of red ink. In yet another expression of the MTA's debt crisis, Moody's Investors Service in late May downgraded the credit rating of the MTA-controlled Bridge and Tunnel Authority from Aa2 to Aa3.

This debt was incurred to pay for years of reconstruction needed to save a subway system that in the late 1970 and early 1980s was in a very advanced state of disrepair, especially the tracks and signal system. If billions of dollars had not been spent for this necessary work, there was a real danger that the country's largest subway system would have collapsed.

However, this repair and construction was not properly funded by either Democratic or Republican administrations, on the local, state or federal government levels. As a result, the agency just kept issuing bonds accumulating ever-larger principal and interest obligations.

The politicians of both parties are now demanding that workers and young people who depend upon mass transit sacrifice through fare hikes and service cuts and that transit workers accept sweeping concessions in order to pay the interest on this bond debt, which goes to enrich wealthy investors.

There is enormous wealth that exists and can be used for a free, clean, safe and efficient transit system and to improve the living standards not only of transit workers but of the working class as a whole. But this requires nationalizing the banks and major corporations under workers' control and redirecting resources from paying debts to the financial oligarchy to meeting the needs of the working population.

Both the Democratic and the Republican parties represent the interests of Wall Street speculators against the workers. If the Republican Party seeks to dismantle the unions, the Democratic Party both nationally and locally has been using the unions to impose sacrifices on their members and the entire working class. This is why TWU local 100, with the trade union movement as a whole, has endorsed President Obama for reelection.

In order to carry out a genuine struggle against the financial speculators, it is necessary to break with the Democrats and create new forms of workers organization independent of the unions and committed to socialist policies. This is the purpose of the candidacy of Jerry White and Phyllis Scherrer of the Socialist Equality Party for US president and vice president in the current election.

The WSWs spoke to a number of transit workers who work at Stillwell in Brooklyn, the system's largest single subway station.

Marvin Springer, a train operator, said, "I don't think it is any good not having a contract after nearly six months. The union is supposed to fight for us. They are our voice. I don't know why they haven't been fighting for us. They are blaming it on the MTA.

"I don't think what the MTA is demanding from us can be a deal at all. A deal has to be people getting something on both sides. Both parties have to be able to say 'we won'. We don't win if we don't get a wage increase.

"They like to blame the transit workers for the fares going up. The Transit Authority needs to stop hiding behind us to explain to riders about the fare increases. Every day people complain to us about the high fares, not to the TA. I understand the anger they feel, but this is the MTA and the politicians' fault, not the transit workers'.

"The state is the one who has cut back the most on the transit

system. This is Cuomo. What I think about Cuomo is that I am not going to vote for him again."

Another train operator, James, commented, "The union makes it seem like they are working on this. But it has been six months that we haven't had a contract. It has been a bad job by the union."

Arturo Betty is also a train operator. "There is no contract here because everything the MTA agrees to, they turn around and retract," he said. "If you keep workers' wages down, there is more money for the top officials to mishandle. The MTA is being run like a corporation, not a city service and city agency.

"The problem with [Local 100 president John] Samuelsen is that he should keep the union apart from the city. They should be independent of the MTA, but no, they both live and have their offices at 2 Broadway.

"The three year wage freeze is ridiculous."

Audrey Chapman is car cleaner. She explained, "I don't like the idea that we do not have a contract. We should have a wage increase every year. They should cut the people at the top. They get six-figure salaries, and all they do is push papers. We can't even get a stinking raise, and we are the ones who keep the trains clean and keep the trains running.

"There are people taking pictures of transit workers now. Since we don't have a contract Fox 5 News has been taking our pictures. We are famous on Fox 5. The people who take pictures of cleaners are doing it to make it look like we don't work so we don't deserve a wage increase. However, during every workday there are times when no trains are in the station, open and available to be worked on.

"In addition to the three-year wage freeze, I don't like the fact that we will be paying more for our health care.

"The cleaners don't like the fact that stations have taken us over. Sooner or later, they will want us to clean the station bathrooms. We are here to clean the trains. That is how we were hired. I'm not saying we are too good to clean stations, but they want to add this work onto us.

"I agree with having a union, but many people are losing faith in the union. They are taking our money and doing nothing. Nobody likes Samuelsen, and nobody is going to re-elect him. Nobody thinks that Samuelsen is doing anything. I am losing faith in the system."



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