

New Jersey Transit strike deadline approaches

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Eleven unions, the bargaining agents for 4,200 rail workers at New Jersey Transit, have threatened to strike if management does not reach a contract agreement with them over wages and benefits by Sunday, when a federally mandated 60-day cooling-off period ends. The workers have been without a contract since 2011.

The New Jersey Transit Rail Labor Coalition is asking for an 18.4 percent raise over seven years and a cap on workers' health care costs at 2.5 percent of base pay. NJ Transit has countered with a 10.9 percent raise over the length of the contract and a cap on contributions of 20 percent. According to the unions, such an increase in health care costs (an average hike of \$460 a month, and as much as \$642 a month for some) would represent a cut in pay for many rail workers.

Two Presidential Emergency Boards have been favorable to the unions' extremely modest demands. If a strike goes forward, Congress will be able to impose a settlement under the federal Railway Labor Act.

On Thursday, New Jersey Transit—the third-largest bus, rail and light rail transit system by ridership in the US—sent workers a letter notifying them their medical benefits would be suspended in the event of a walkout.

NJ Transit's offer has left rail workers feeling insulted and angry. Rail worker Jack Abercrombie told the WSWs, "It is garbage. The contract is garbage. The medical takeaways are making us pay too much."

There is a possibility that the unions, faced with workers' outrage, might be forced to organize a short strike to let off steam. The Rail Labor Coalition has no perspective whatsoever for a fight with the political and financial establishment.

The New York-New Jersey transit system, a key component of the national infrastructure, is overburdened and crisis-ridden. Sections of it are

simply crumbling.

New Jersey Transit has a fleet of some 2,500 buses and operates 11 commuter and three light rail lines. It serves not only New Jersey but also locations in New York and Pennsylvania. It carries over 900,000 commuters each weekday, including 100,000 who travel from New Jersey on commuter rail to work in New York City, and thousands of others who arrive in Manhattan by bus. The Holland and Lincoln Tunnels between New Jersey and Manhattan, which carry auto and bus traffic, are already seriously overcrowded.

Under its contingency plans for a strike, NJ Transit has said it will be able to handle only about 40,000 commuters who travel by train to Manhattan each weekday.

Negotiations are taking place under the shadow of the political troubles of New Jersey's governor, Chris Christie, who appoints the managing board of NJ Transit and makes the ultimate decision in negotiations. Already unpopular, he has seen his statewide approval ratings plummet recently in the wake of his endorsement of Donald Trump.

Well-known for his arrogance and bullying, Christie has also made a name for himself with his concerted attacks on the social rights of the working class, especially in the areas of public education and transportation.

Widespread anger has been mounting at the condition of public transit in New Jersey.

During Hurricane Sandy in 2012, over a quarter of the agency's fleet was damaged. Several lines were impacted for months in what was widely regarded as the result of years of underfunding and poor planning.

Since 2011, budget cuts to New Jersey Transit of nearly \$400 million have been implemented by Democrats and Republicans in the state legislature.

Last July riders saw a 9 percent fare hike and a reduction in services.

The state's Transportation Trust Fund, its capital reservoir for expansion and improvement, is set to run out in a matter of months and Christie's 2017 budget does not include funds to replenish it.

The WSWs spoke to a number of NJ Transit workers at New York City's Penn Station, the terminus for most of the system's commuter lines. Anger directed at Christie was combined with distrust of the Democrats and suspicion toward the rail unions.

One worker noted, "The Democrats are just cutting a little less, but they are both doing the same thing. Now the question arises, how far will the union leadership go? But with them, I think we lose either way. They give you \$5.00 with a pay increase, and then take away \$25.00 with new health care charges. But if you don't have a contract, you need to strike."

A worker with 14 years of experience added, "We haven't had a raise in five years, and even with this contract, we will be the lowest-paid [rail workers] in the area. Medical is really the sticking point in this contract. What they are currently asking us to pay is astronomical."

Asked about the political issues in the contract, the same individual said, "Christie isn't well-liked. The first thing he did as governor was cut the budget for transit. The state is claiming that they don't have the money, but I don't believe it."

George Adams, who has also worked for New Jersey Transit for 14 years, said, "The state keeps claiming that if we get raises there will be fare increases. We have been working without a raise for five years, and the state has still increased the fares. Now we are asking for a 2.6 percent [annual] wage increase, and they are trying to blame us. New Jersey is not a cheap state to live in, and a lot of people that live there are the working poor. We don't want to strike, but if I don't like the contract, I will vote 'no.'"

A young conductor said, "I am new, on a lower tier, with only one-and-a-half years and I don't really know what is going on. The negotiators are way up there and we are way down here. We are in the dark about what they are doing."

New Jersey Transit rail workers struck for 34 days in 1983.



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