

Two New Jersey Transit unions reject contract agreement

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The majority of workers in two unions representing conductors and locomotive engineers employed by New Jersey Transit, a statewide public transportation agency, have rejected settlements negotiated by their union leaders.

The majority of the conductors, represented by United Transportation Union C&T division local 60, voted on Saturday to reject the offer, as did a majority of the members of The New Jersey Transit Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen on Friday.

A spokesperson for NJ Transit, Nancy Snyder, said that while a slim majority voted down the deal in the two unions, the majority of workers in the other 14 union ratified it. The tentative agreement negotiated by all the union leaders with the transit commuter railroad, the nation's third largest, was reached on March 11, 30 hours before a March 13 strike or lockout deadline.

Snyder also said that, since the membership rejected the deal, the two unions have the right, under the Federal Railway Labor Act, to resume negotiations. Union officials have said that they will return to the bargaining table, but it is not clear when.

The spokesperson also noted, however, that "These 14 contracts have been finally approved by the Board of NJ Transit and are now final and in effect," and that there is a 60-day "cooling off" period for the two unions that rejected the contract, which precludes strikes or lockouts.

There are about 4,200 employees who work for NJ Transit who are impacted by the current contract talks. All the union member employees had been working without a contract since the last one expired in mid-2011. The last and only NJ Transit strike was in March 1983 and lasted for 34 days.

Although all the officials involved have been secretive about the details of the negotiations, the

current agreement reportedly gives the workers a 21 percent salary increase retroactive from 2011 and in effect until the end of 2019, about a paltry 2.3 percent increase per year. It also requires them to contribute from \$130 to \$160 monthly for health insurance coverage, an increase from the current fixed rate of \$81.05 a month. The agreement reportedly also includes, for the first time, a required deductible of between \$250 and \$500 a month for medical care. In addition, it has been reported that the deal includes concessions on pay and retirement benefits for new hires.

New Jersey's Republican governor Chris Christie had promised that there will be no fare hike through June 2017; but nothing was said about July of that year which is only 14 months away. Fares for riders have already gone up 30 percent for the last six years, while services have been cut. Roughly 900,000 commuters ride NJ Transit each workday, which serves not just the state of New Jersey, but parts of Pennsylvania and New York as well.

NJ Transit has lost 90 percent of its state funding in the last 10 years. The continuous attack on the livelihood of New Jersey transit workers and the transit system itself is one example of the austerity measures that have been carried out against public services for working people throughout the country.

Without a doubt, the vote by workers to reject the union-approved contract expresses the sentiment of the many NJ Transit workers who opposed the wage agreements, the cutbacks in health care, and attacks on the new hires. Many others clearly felt that they had to vote for the contract, concluding that under the present straitjacket of the unions, a better settlement was not possible.

Nevertheless, the vote against the contract expresses a

powerful sentiment for all those who are fed up with the non-stop demands by employers for concessions and givebacks, which have contributed to a general decline in living standards and working conditions.



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