

New York City transit workers must fight to defend living standards and basic rights!

6 January 2017

The following statement is being distributed to New York City transit workers who are holding a mass meeting Saturday, ahead of the January 15 contract deadline for 30,000 bus drivers, subway workers and other transit authority workers.

The mass meeting of transit workers today, just one week before the January 15 contract deadline, takes place after workers have suffered years of stagnant or falling wages while the super-rich in New York City have accumulated grotesque levels of personal wealth. Now one of New York's ruling elite, the billionaire real estate mogul and con man Donald Trump, is about to enter the White House and unleash an assault on every gain won by the working class over a century of struggle.

Transit workers, like workers throughout the city, are struggling to keep up with rising costs in the most expensive city in the US. They rightly want to roll back the attacks of recent decades and make up for past sacrifices. Once again, however, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), state and local politicians and the media insist there is no money to provide adequate wages, benefits and work conditions to the 30,000 workers who make New York City move.

While the MTA has not issued all of its concession demands, those that have been publicized add up, along with an insulting pay increase, to a further decline in living standards along with increased productivity, which can only make the job even more onerous, difficult and hazardous. Management also wants to increase the number of part-timers, and reduce payments for reporting, travel and wash-up time. MTA officials also want to expand broadbanding (combining various job titles) and reduce the number of times workers can pick for better jobs.

According to union statistics, at least 235 New York City transit employees have been killed on the job since 1946. The latest fatality took place on November 3, when two construction flaggers tried to jump into an alcove to avoid an oncoming train. Louis Gray, 53, was killed and his partner was seriously hurt. A third victim was the train operator, who could not see them around a curve until it was too late, and had to be taken to a hospital for shock and trauma.

In terms of wages, TWU Local 100 President John Samuelson said at a rally in mid-November he would not accept a wage offer of only 2 percent. The MTA, however, has only budgeted for 2 percent annual increases in the new contract. Even if the

union agreed to pay hikes modestly above that figure, this would represent a cut in real pay over the life of the agreement. The official inflation rate notoriously underestimates the costs of health care, education, utilities and other basic needs.

In the last deal negotiated by Samuelson, workers got an insulting 8 percent increase over five years. In addition, employee contributions for health benefits were increased from 1.5 to 2 percent, and the time it took for new employees to reach top pay scale jumped to five years compared to the previous three-year period.

Pensions have been another means by which the MTA has chipped away at transit workers' benefits while pitting newer against older workers. According to the state constitution there can be no reduction in benefits of current employees. However, they can be lowered for newly hired workers and the TWU has gone along with that. As a result, there are now six levels (tiers) of pension plans for state employees, with only a very small number of high-seniority workers still receiving the pension benefits that were won in past struggles.

The struggle facing transit workers, like that of every other section of the working class, is a political one. Transit management says it cannot offer anything more because of a growing financial crisis. According to a recent report issued by New York State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli, the MTA will have a debt of \$41 billion by 2020, 43 percent higher than 10 years earlier. The fare has been increased by 45 percent over this period, three times faster than the rate of inflation and six times faster than the increase of average salaries. And the MTA has already held public hearings to impose another 4 percent hike in March 2017, with plans for yet another increase in 2019. An anti-poverty advocacy group found that one-fourth of poor New Yorkers could not afford the present fare.

As usual the MTA officials, politicians and media are seeking to pit transit workers against the riding public, saying any improvements in the living standards of workers would be paid for by future fare hikes. But neither transit workers, nor working people as a whole, are to blame for the financial crisis. It is the direct result of the deepening crisis of the capitalist system and the draining of public resources to finance the Wall Street bailout, tax cuts for big business and servicing the debts owed to the very same banks and financial institutions that crashed the economy in 2008.

New York is the tale of two cities. One is dominated by the super-wealthy speculators and financial parasites that have driven up housing costs and dominate every aspect of economic, political and cultural life. The other is inhabited by the great mass of working people who operate the subways, buses, schools, hospitals, power plants, construction sites, offices and retail shops every day. Although the working class produces the real wealth of society, workers have absolutely no say-so over the distribution of that wealth.

The main problem is that workers have no organizations to defend their interests. The Transport Workers Union functions as a tool of MTA management, Governor Cuomo and Mayor Bill deBlasio. They all agree that the jobs, living standards and working conditions of transit workers must be subordinated to the insatiable demand of the banks and big business for even more profit.

Workers are increasingly determined to defend previous gains, but the unions have worked to keep struggles isolated and suppressed. The powerful six-day Philadelphia transit strike by nearly 5,000 workers that took place in early November was shut down by TWU Local 234, Local 100's sister local, right before Election Day, in a failed attempt to help Hillary Clinton's campaign in the state of Pennsylvania.

Local 100, also in bed with the Democrats, supported Bernie Sanders in his campaign, which he obediently dropped in favor of the candidacy of Hillary Clinton, the preferred candidate of Wall Street.

At the Local 100 contract rally in mid-November, TWU national President Harry Lombardo said that the management in Philadelphia wanted health care concessions and "they got none of that." This is a blatant lie. In reality workers will see their health care contributions rise from 1 percent to 2.5 percent of their pay by December 2019, for the same coverage. For the average worker this means a rise from \$46 to \$115 per month, and there will also be an increase in co-pays for doctor and hospital visits, as well as prescription medications.

The TWU will not defend workers. It is up to workers to take the initiative. The Socialist Equality Party urges transit workers to elect rank-and-file committees to plan and lead the struggle for a decent contract. A list of demands should be drawn up, which includes a 30 percent increase in wages, the restoration of health and pension benefits and the abolishing of the hated two-tier wage system. Other demands should be elaborated to ensure sufficient rest and break time, adequate staffing levels and workers' control of health and safety conditions.

A fight by transit workers would inspire millions of workers around the city to take up their own demands for good-paying and secure jobs, affordable housing and health care and high-quality public and higher education. Transit workers should reach out to workers throughout the city and organize rallies, demonstrations and other joint actions to defend the social rights of the working class.

The electoral victory of Trump, with all of the dangers it

poses to every section of workers, is the culmination of decades of reactionary policies, aided and increasingly presided over by Democrats as well as Republicans. Democratic politicians like Cuomo and de Blasio are responsible for policies that allowed Trump to posture as the "anti-establishment" candidate and opponent of the status quo. While saying as little as possible about the right-wing government he is assembling of billionaires, ex-generals and ultra reactionaries that want to destroy Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, the Democrats criticize Trump for not being aggressive enough against Russia as they beat the drums for a new world war.

Democrats like Senator Charles Schumer and top union executives have expressed their support for Trump's program of economic nationalism, seeking to pit American workers against their brothers and sisters around the world. But transit workers are made up of virtually every nationality on the globe and they know that it is possible to defend their interests only by uniting all workers, regardless of race or nationality.

Transit workers are in a fight against the entire economic and political order, which serves the rich at the expense of the working class. But they have powerful allies in the masses of struggling workers and young people who face the same fight. The battle by transit workers to defend their social rights must be combined with the struggle to build a mass political movement of the working class, independent of the two capitalist parties, and committed to the fight for socialism and real equality.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* will provide transit workers with as much assistance as possible in this struggle. We urge you to contact the SEP today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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