

As contract expiration nears, union moves to block fight by New York transit workers

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At a mass meeting of several thousand New York City transit workers Saturday, officials from Transport Workers Union Local 100 sought to dampen the militancy of workers by promoting the illusion that state Democrats, including Governor Andrew Cuomo, could be relied on to secure workers' just demands for improved wages, benefits and working conditions. The current contract covering approximately 34,000 bus and subway workers employed by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) expires Sunday, January 15.

The relatively small turnout at the meeting held at Madison Square Garden was telling. The vast majority of transit workers have no confidence that the TWU will wage any struggle on their behalf. If a serious battle is to be waged it must be initiated by rank-and-file workers themselves.

This was confirmed by the meeting itself where no workers were permitted to speak from the floor and no strike vote was taken. Virtually nothing was said about the current negotiation even though the contract deadline is just week away. Instead local president John Samuelsen bragged about the union being a major player in the city's politics through its support for Democratic politicians.

While most of the other municipal union leaders have already endorsed this year's reelection bid by Democratic Mayor Bill De Blasio, Samuelsen made a demagogic criticism of the mayor, saying he was "anti-transit." Since his election in 2013, de Blasio, working with the unions, has opposed workers' demands to recoup what they lost during the three terms of billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Samuelsen specifically praised New York state's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo—another austerity politician who also selects the chairman of the

MTA, a state agency. In 2014, Samuelsen and the union executive board endorsed Cuomo's reelection bid in exchange for his collaboration in securing a new labor agreement. Far from protecting workers, the deal provided a mere eight percent wage hike over five years and increased employee contribution for health benefits from 1.5 to 2 percent. It also worsened the hated two-tier wage system, increasing the time it took for new employees to reach top pay to five years compared to three years in the previous contract.

One of the union's slogans is "Fix Tier 6," a reference to the most inferior pension plan imposed on state employees, including transit workers. Samuelsen failed to mention that the Tier 6 scheme was passed by the state legislature and signed by Cuomo. The union president explicitly did not call for the restoration of full pension benefits.

Putting forward the most modest and inadequate demands, Samuelsen called for a wage hike of "more" than two percent a year without citing any specific figure. In deals signed with de Blasio, the teachers and other municipal employee unions have already accepted the insulting two percent limit and that is all the MTA has budgeted for a new contract.

Transit workers, who live in one of the most expensive cities in the world, have already suffered through more than a decade of stagnant real wages. They are determined to recoup lost income and to restore cost of living adjustments given away by the TWU.

"I voted no in the last contract because it was a sellout," Thomas, a subway construction flagman who attended the meeting, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "We need a better contract. Toussaint [the previous Transport Workers Union local 100 president] and Samuelsen sold us out. I am watching very closely

what things they are giving away.

“I don’t like Trump or any other politicians including the Democrats and the Republicans. I think socialism is a good idea. Working people need to pay close attention and learn politics because the rich have theirs to a science.”

Thomas worked in the same area where fellow transit worker Louis Gray was killed November 3, 2016 by an oncoming train while he setting up warning lights to protect other workers maintaining nearby track. “That area is a very dangerous. It is a curve and the train operator doesn’t see you. It is a place where you have to work and get out of there very fast. I understand the train operator’s situation as well.”

Transit workers are facing a political fight not only against the MTA but against the Democrats and Republicans and the TWU and other city unions that collaborate with them. All of these forces agree that transit workers and the working class as a whole must pay for the massive corporate tax giveaways that have driven up the MTA deficit and the usurious debt servicing costs demanded by the financial institutions. The authority’s accumulated long-term bond debt is projected to be \$41 billion by 2020, a 43 percent increase from 2010.

The conditions exist for transit workers to forge a powerful unity with other city workers and the millions of transit users who will be hit with another fare hike of four percent on March 19. According to a report issued by the New York state comptroller, Thomas P. DiNapoli, the fare has risen 45 percent between 2007 and 2015, three times faster than the rate of inflation and six times faster than the increase of the average salaries. About a quarter of poor New Yorkers cannot afford to pay the fare now and the MTA is preparing another four percent fare hike in 2019.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* passed out hundreds of statements, titled, “New York City transit workers must fight to defend living standards and basic rights!”

The statement urged transit workers to organize rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the TWU and fight to mobilize the broadest support in the working class for a struggle against the MTA, the two big business parties and the profit system they defend.

In 2005, transit workers struck for three days

demonstrating the immense power of the working class in the financial and cultural center of the United States. Uniting transit workers of every race and virtually every nationality in the polyglot city, the strike also demonstrated the popular support for a fight against the Bloomberg administration and the unchallenged rule of Wall Street. The battle was sabotaged, however, by the TWU and other unions.

Under the reactionary Taylor law, passed by the same politicians that the unions routinely support, a strike by public employees is illegal in New York state and workers can be fined two days’ pay for every day having walked of the job. Most concerning for the union apparatus, however, is the union can also be fined millions of dollars and see the suspension of the dues checkoff system, which automatically subtracts dues from the workers’ paychecks.

Unlike past union mass membership meetings, there was no open microphone where rank-and-file members could express their dissatisfaction. This is precisely what the union bureaucracy seeks to suppress. Indeed, the union president closed the meeting calling for unity which translates as, “Don’t you dare criticize the leadership.”

Whatever the efforts, however, a clash between rank-and-file workers and the union apparatus—which functions as a tool of the government and the Democratic Party—is inevitable. Preparations must be made now to establish lines of communication between different sections of workers and forge the most powerful unity of the working class to fight for basic social rights.



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