

“The working class needs better health care, wages, and retirement.”

New York transit workers discuss issues in contract battle

A WSWWS reporting team
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New York City transit workers attending the mass membership meeting at Madison Square Garden Saturday spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the issues in their contract fight. The current five-year labor agreement, which covers 34,000 subway, bus and other transit workers, expires on Sunday, January 15. A report on the meeting can be found [here](#).

Jose, a car equipment inspector with five years, told the WSWWS, “The last contract was eight percent over five years. What we got should have been more. With the minimum wage up to \$11 dollars an hour, that is close to us, and we should be getting more. I hope we get a 15 or 16 percent raise this time.

“Nothing happened for two-and-a-half years after the last contract expired. [Transport Workers Union President John] Samuelson was just saying ‘no’ to three bad offers. I don’t agree with doing nothing for two-and-a-half years after our contract ends. We waited so long last time that we, the transit workers, got screwed. This time around we should do something now and get more.

“I don’t agree with Samuelson saying we should get just a little more than two percent. He should speak up for what we want. I don’t think we are on the side of Cuomo, but last time Samuelson praised and called on Cuomo to give us a contract.

“Samuelson will not do anything on January 15 when our contract runs out. This leaves us out in the cold. We have no one to speak for us.

“I think Trump’s election is worse for us, and we are going to have to struggle harder. I think we should do something like that, uniting the whole working class, and come together with school bus drivers, teachers, city workers and riders.

“The working class should have its own political party so our voice will be heard, and we need to mobilize everybody.”

Tisha explained, “I am in the lowest position in the Metropolitan Transit Authority. I am a traffic checker. I survey busses and subways for schedule accuracy and ridership. We survey the lines to see if the MTA needs to change the frequency or timetables of the various routes.”

The work conditions are difficult, she added. “In a Surface Point assignment for instance, we have to stand outside at a bus stop with a wind chill of negative eight degrees to record the schedules and count how many passengers get on and off. The pay for our job starts at \$13 an hour and the maximum we can get is \$17 an hour. Our starting wage is below the minimum wage in New York City. Then let’s say the MTA decides to cancel our work for a day or two during the week. They force us to use our personal and vacation days to get paid for those days. If you want a half-decent paycheck, you have to do that.

“Sometimes people in the transit workers union are getting paychecks for less than \$100 a week, and I don’t know how you can maintain an apartment, food and clothing in New York City for that little, especially with children. I think we should be getting at least \$20 or \$21 an hour.

“A lot of people have to supplement our pay with food stamps. I think there are about 300 traffic checkers working and in the union. We have to travel all around the city going from job to job.

“The union tells us you are getting a raise, but it just covers what you are losing in health care. What sense does that make? The union does a lot of rolling over. It

is not just where it should be defending traffic checkers, but for all transit workers. One concession from the last contract is having to work for five years before you make top wage in your category. Who can wait for five years?

“I see a lot of things being done for MTA contractors who make six-figure salaries and can stay at home; while we have to stay outside in the freezing cold and make less than the minimum wage.

“I am an independent. I don’t think much of the Democrats or Republicans. I don’t think either one will help us with our contract. Cuomo was responsible for how bad the last one was. I don’t think either one is good. In the two-party system, we are not represented. It is the poor people who are not represented. The Democrats want money, and they go to the people who have money, not to us. I think Hillary Clinton lost Florida because of what the Clintons did in Haiti, stealing people’s lands. This along with the welfare cuts as well.

“The problem with American politics is corruption. Millions of dollars are spent on elections. And how can there be just two parties?

“The union is not the same as it once was. They just placate the employers. They don’t represent the worker. I believe in socialism.”

Shawn, a station agent, said, “I feel the working class needs better health care, better wages, cost of living increases and better retirement. This is my 24th year as a transit worker, and they have taken away the holiday and weekend time off job picks for senior people.

“I think the struggle against Trump will be worse than with Obama.

“There was no strike vote at the meeting. It means they don’t want to strike. To me the last strike was not effective because the contract was not better than the one before.

“I know they won’t give us the 20 and 50 retirement program. I fault Samuelsen for this, and I fault Samuelsen and Cuomo for the lower tier 6 pension plan. Whenever they want something new today, it hurts the little people.”

A bus driver who had just started with the MTA in September told the WSWs, “We need more than a two percent increase. That is nothing. The cost of living is sky high in New York. A transit worker is being attacked every thirty hours. We need pay that is

proportionate to the risk of this work.”

Regarding the political struggle facing workers, he said, “People were surprised in the election. People have lost their belief in the system. So you had the Sanders’ vote. Now Trump is putting people in his cabinet that are all about looking out for the rich.”



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