

“We should take a stand and reject this contract”

New York transit workers denounce sellout agreement

A WSWWS reporting team
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New York transit workers reacted with dissatisfaction and anger over the tentative settlement worked out between Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). The agreement, which covers about 38,000 bus and subway workers, was reached Monday, hours after the old contract expired on January 15.

One of the complaints of workers is that the union is urging them to vote ‘yes’ on a contract that they have not even seen. Instead the TWU has circulated a “highlights” document that presents the deal in the best light. What little has been revealed, however, includes an insulting annual wage increase of 2.14 percent over the 28-month contract. This is a mere 0.14 percent more than what the MTA budgeted for employee raises. The increase would do nothing to reverse the fall in real wages workers have suffered due to the concessions the union has accepted for decades.

In 2012, the TWU pushed through a five-year contract that increased worker contributions to health benefits and lengthened the time new employees must work to reach top pay from three years to five years. These concessions remain, along with substandard pension plans for newer workers despite the union’s claims that it would “Fix Tier 6.”

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team spoke with transit workers in the East New York neighborhood of Brooklyn. Alec is a car maintenance inspector who complained about the TWU local and its relationship with Democratic Governor Cuomo, whom the union endorsed in the last election

“I don’t know why the contract runs for 28 months. That is weird, and the union didn’t explain why this was so. Maybe it does have something to do with Governor Cuomo and his reelection schedule. I am fairly new and I

thought any contract we would get would be for three years, not two years and four months.

“The union said we would get a copy of the contract. They took down our addresses, but they didn’t tell us when we would be getting it.

“We are on the back burner with Cuomo. We went two years last time without a contract, and then we were shorted with an eight percent increase over five years. Workers need to catch up with this contract. Cuomo has already shorted us once. We need a contract with more money, and a contract that will run for three years.

“Cuomo was the one who set up Tier 6. We newer guys have to put in 4.7 percent of our pay for our Tier 6 pension. Tier 5 people only have to put in about two percent. So we are pretty much paying double for our pensions, and the MTA is saving money there. There are more savings for the MTA because it also takes us five years to make top pay grade, not three years like before the last contract. He shorted us again there, and now wants to short us once more with our new contract.

“We are going to find out what Trump is doing, and I don’t think he is pro-union. If Cuomo gets his way as well, it is going to be tough.

“Transit workers should take a stand and reject this contract absolutely, and mobilize city workers and other workers against these worsening conditions. We are all together in this. Workers across the country have to stand up for their proper wages and benefits.”

Lloyd, a train conductor for three years, said, “The whole deal is garbage. The union has not fought for the workers. It’s just something that they came up with. We risk our lives on this job. I just came back from an assault.

“I don’t think it’s going to get a lot of ‘yes’ votes. It is not enough to match the cost of living, which keeps going up and up. I live in an apartment because I cannot afford

to buy a house and get stuck with mortgage that I'm not able to pay.

"The working class is struggling and the poor people are struggling even more. It is necessary for ordinary people to get together, not just the rich who control everything."

Tamina, a bus operator for four years, spoke mostly about working conditions, one of the main issues that provoked the six-day Philadelphia transit strike, which was also sold out by the TWU.

"There are no proper comfort facilities for women. They do not give you enough rest time between trips and the time it takes to go to the bathroom impacts on customer service because they have to wait for us. I don't see any improvement in the new contract."

Kimberly is a cleaner. She said, "We need more money. We also need improvements to Tier 6 and this incredible 30/62 requirement that you must work for 30 years and be 62 before you can retire to a Tier 6 pension. I haven't seen the contract, so I can't tell you how I will vote until I read it."

Glen is a bus operator with nine years of service. He explained, "I don't think very highly of the contract. It is only a 2.14 percent wage increase. It is not much different than two percent. And why is it only 28 months?"

"At the Madison Square Garden rally, [TWU President John] Samuelsen said we are not going to take any two percent raise but 2.14% is hardly above that. They have taken pay, benefits and retirement rights away from us for seven years while the cost of living goes up every year. The raise is not going to cover food, gas, tolls and rent. It doesn't look like they are going to shift the growing gap between the rich and poor at all. It certainly is not being addressed with this transit workers' contract. This raise is like pennies."

Cleo, also a bus operator, joined the discussion. "We are overworked, overtired and underpaid. We have to work overtime at MTA to make more money because they won't allow an outside job. We only get 40 minutes for our lunch break, and none of this is addressed in the contract. Why can't we get a one-hour lunch like civilized people to go to the bathroom and have lunch? When we are late on our runs, we don't get to take our meals."

Glen pointed out, "The MTA hasn't changed the bus schedules, but they cut the time they expect the driver to make the run. As a result you get to the end of the line, and it is already time to turn around and go back. You have no break at all."

Glen returned to the problem caused by the MTA cutting operators' scheduled time for the bus routes. "On top of that the speed limit has been reduced by Mayor de Blasio's new program. This makes us continually late if we are not getting speeding tickets, and when we get to the end of the line and we are late, we get no break or any rest."

A few more bus operators gathered to express their anger, and the reporter asked what they would recommend the workforce at transit do about this contract. They called out unanimously, "Turn it down! Turn it down!"

Bus operator Cleo returned to the deteriorating conditions transit workers face. "Bus drivers are the face of transit," she said, "But they want more out of us, and they give us less. When there is a snowstorm or hurricane, we are mandated to come to work. We have to come in or we are penalized. But if you want to have a specific day off, you can't just send them a note. You have to come in and 'sit' a month ahead of time. You have to come in for a 4 pm to 12 midnight roll call and be there for every hour. Then you will still lose your ability to get your daughter's birthday off if you do all this, but don't report for roll the next morning at 9 AM. Why don't they hire some more drivers and buy some more busses?"

Then she added, "Maybe there should be a strike. A strike would bring attention to the fact that we are not the underdog."

Nate, a bus operator with two years, said, "I think Samuelsen should go back to the table and get us some more money. I say we should get a 10 percent raise each year. We deserve to be able to live here in the city where we work. We shouldn't be forced to move out of the city we work in because the cost of living is going up so much, and we don't have a cost of living increase. Tolls, food and gas are going up. But rent is the number one cost, and rent here is constantly going up."



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