

New York transit workers' opposition builds against contract sellout

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With ballots due to return on February 15, New York City transit workers have expressed increasing hostility to the tentative agreement negotiated by Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). The TWU reached the deal, which will cover 38,000 bus and subway workers, on January 16, hours after the old contract expired.

The agreement stipulates a meager 2.14 percent raise per year over the 28-month contract. This is a mere .14 percent higher than the 2 percent per year hike the MTA had budgeted.

The claim by TWU local 100 President John Samuelson that the agreement is “well above” the city’s rate of inflation is patently false. The rate of inflation in the New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island area rose 2.1 percent over the year, the largest 12-month increase in over three years, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Samuelson has also said the contract will protect transit workers from the right-wing policies that will be implemented by President Donald Trump. This is nothing but hot air aimed at building up the credentials of the TWU, which also endorsed Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries. In fact, the new administration is hell bent to slash or eliminate Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, health benefits and occupational safety standards.

The lifting of safety regulations will be deadly to transit workers. Just last November, a transit worker was killed when he was struck by a train.

At the same time, transit and other city workers are facing continuous attacks by the Democrats in Albany and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio. Samuelson has repeatedly praised Governor Andrew Cuomo, who has overseen a program of austerity for workers of the

state and city, while Wall Street has reached record highs.

The TWU-MTA deal was reached just as transit officials voted to raise the transit fare by about 4 percent. The increase, which will go into effect on March 19, is the latest in a series of fare hikes, which is increasingly making public transportation unaffordable for the millions of low-paid workers in the city.

Jose, a conductor with 14 years of experience, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “A lot of people are telling me they are voting ‘no.’ The transit agency puts something on the table and it is assumed we are going to vote for it.

“We have families to support. Even with the inadequate raises we get, with the fare going up 4 percent, the media wants the public to point the blame to us. We should be in unity with all workers that are paying for the fare hike.”

The past concessions handed over by the TWU are all retained in the new agreement, including increased health benefit costs and a longer waiting period to reach top pay. In addition, there is ominous language in the new deal suggesting that the eight-hour per day, 40-hour guaranteed work week will be eliminated, creating the conditions for a part-time or temporary “as needed” labor force.

A section in the agreement for rapid transit, which includes train operators, tower operators (workers who control signals), and conductors is headed “Alternate 40-hour Work Week.” It calls for formal discussion between the union and the transit authority “to discuss a mutually agreed upon alternate work week schedule, working conditions and pay provisions.”

Another section for the buses calls for discussions for “a four (4) day work week with the aim of 1) increasing employee availability...”

These sections indicate both the union and transit agency are engaged in a backroom deal to push through even deeper concessions once the contract is ratified. One of the most fundamental rights of transit workers is to be paid overtime rates after an eight-hour shift, with five days and 40 hours guaranteed work per week.

Even if part-time bus operators are not introduced, as the union claims, it will still translate into an attack on overtime pay, which so many workers rely on to make ends meet. In other words, the insulting wage hike will translate into a dramatic pay cut. If the MTA gets its foot in the door with these two sections, it will open a Pandora's box for the entire workforce.

Workers have also opposed the more limited use of overtime if they agreed to work on regularly scheduled days off.

Both transit workers and riders are being squeezed to pay the MTA's \$36 billion long term bond debt to wealthy investors. The debt is projected to rise to \$41.4 billion by 2020, up 43 percent over a decade. The major Wall Street banks have also made millions through the sale of interest rate swaps to the MTA.

The TWU has functioned as a tool of MTA management and the Cuomo administration, suppressing the resistance of workers and insisting that workers have no choice but to continue accepting concessions. With social inequality and social discontent reaching a boiling point in New York City, the metropolis with the world's most billionaires (79, with a net worth of \$364.6 billion) the unions have desperately sought to keep the lid on the class struggle.

One of the TWU's main slogans during the negotiations was to "fix tier six," a reference to the inferior state pension plan for newer employees. The TWU never mentioned, however, that it was their ally, Governor Cuomo, who enthusiastically signed this into law. The length of the contract is also significant, since it expires after Cuomo comes up for reelection, in November 2018, providing him with "labor peace" during his term of office in exchange for defending the income and institutional interests of the TWU officialdom.

In the wake of MTA chairman Tom Prendergast's retirement, the TWU chief has been selected to be part of a search committee to recommend to Cuomo the next head of the agency who will continue the attack on transit workers and riders. The TWU would no doubt

also come running if Trump asked for their collaboration in his "infrastructure plans," which will be a boondoggle for big business and accelerate the privatization of public services.

Transit workers should reject this sellout with the contempt it deserves. Rank-and-file workers should elect their own committees, independent of the TWU, to formulate their own demands, including a 30 percent wage hike to make up for lost wages combined with a cost of living allowance that protects against the ravages of future inflation. These committees must protect workers from unsafe and exhausting schedules. This must be combined with a fight to not only stop the fare increase, but also roll back all previous fare increases.

The protection of workers' jobs and living standards, and the right to affordable and safe public transportation, is a political fight against both big business parties. Rank-and-file committees of transit workers should reach out to the broadest sections of the working class throughout the city to build up a common fight against social inequality, the attacks on immigrants and basic democratic rights.



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