“The working class should defend immigrant rights”

New York transit workers denounce contract, Trump

A WSWS reporting team
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Some 38,000 subway and bus workers in New York City are currently voting on a 28-month contract agreement reached by Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 and the Metropolitan Transit Authority. The deal, which is backed by New York’s governor, Andrew Cuomo, will provide a miserly 2.1 percent annual pay increase in one of the world’s most expensive cities.

There is widespread opposition to the sellout deal among transit workers. Workers are also angered by Trump’s attack on immigrant workers. A large portion of the 38,000-strong transit workforce is made up of immigrants and the children of immigrants from around the world.

A WSWS reporting team interviewed transit workers in three different locations. Two were subway end-of-the-line train stops where crews have some rest time, and the other was the Fillmore bus depot in Brooklyn, where an angry rank-and file had a conflict with union officials attempting to push for a ‘yes’ vote on the contract.

One bus operator described the confrontation. “The union officials barely gave any information about the contract. People were asking questions, but the top union officials weren’t answering.

“Someone asked the officials what happens if there is a ‘no’ vote for the contract. He said it goes back to negotiations. And then a lot of upset people asked, ‘How do you re-negotiate what you already agreed on?’”

Another bus operator from the Fillmore depot explained, “From what I understand is in the contract, the transit authority (TA) and the union don’t care. I wasn’t here for the big union meeting, and the union rep is not saying anything.

“Workers are saying the contract is garbage, and they are not voting for it. Our union rep is not saying anything. He is saying if it is good for you, vote for it; if it is not, don’t vote for it. People are saying it is not good.

“The union is telling us it is a good deal. If you got no results in the last, bad contract, how did Samuelsen win re-election for union president? They don’t even try to raise our wages above inflation. Inflation is higher than this. When gas prices went up, food and everything else went up. When gas prices went down, nothing else went down.”

Adrian, a train maintenance car inspector, told the WSWS, “This is not a good contract. The wages are too low. The $500 signing bonus doesn’t go into our wages at all.

“They didn’t fix Tier 6 (substandard pension plan) and they are expanding the time it takes to reach your top wage. I don’t agree with the transit authority and the union choosing the work boots for us. We should be able to choose our own boots. Overall, they came to an agreement too quickly, and without considering the real needs of workers. The contract is good for the union and the TA, but not for us.

“I know a contract usually runs for three years, not 28 months. Right now, they are trying to get it done and out of the way. The 28 months could cover getting Cuomo re-elected, and then give him a chance to shaft us again.

“I think the people not getting their ballots is another tactic the union is trying to get a ‘yes’ vote. If workers don’t get their ballots, they can’t vote ‘no.’ I didn’t get my ballot until this week. At my previous work location there are car inspectors who didn’t get their ballots on time and still don’t have them. The union leadership is trying to get a ‘yes’ vote. How come everything is being done so quickly, but they can’t send ballots to all the membership on time?

“If transit workers take a stand and reject this contract, with what capitalism and Trump are doing, people would see a way forward fighting against Trump.”

A train cleaner said, “Rent is so high we can’t afford it. We get two paychecks a month, and one full paycheck is not enough to pay the rent. We need much more than the 2 percent wage increase they are offering in the contract. I got my lease agreement the other day and it is going up a lot more than 2 percent. I am paying $995 a month now and it is going up to $1,250 in one year and $1,350 in the second year. What kind of poor woman can afford that rent? My salary isn’t really going up. We need a decent raise. But this is not just for transit workers, it is everybody who needs a decent raise.

“I don’t think they are hiring enough workers either. They keep complaining about how we do the work. If we had enough workers, we could do the job. I don’t think they hire enough

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train cleaners for these locations.

"Trump is looking to build a wall. I think the working class should defend immigrant rights."

Thomasena is a train conductor and is angry about the changes to the overtime compensation and time off system in the new contract. "The contract is horrible. Take just the OTO (Overtime Offsets) alone. This is the system telling us how we can use and save our OTO hours. Now, we can use as much OTO as we want and can save up to 72 hours. If you need a day off and use up one day of OTO, you can build that back up right away based on the amount of overtime we work.

"The new contract limits us to only nine days off a year, where we have unlimited OTO time off now. We get tired and fatigued on the trains, and we need time off. We need time off for our families as well. The overtime work is voluntary but I could build it up and save it for when I need time off. And getting the time off is not easy now. You have to call in 21 days in advance at midnight and be the first because there are only about 12 to 20 slots for off-time in the whole system. This is a horrible contract for that reason alone."

Train operator Edjuard with 30 years' experience told the WSWS, "The union is embracing the MTA's demand to reduce overtime but they don't want to say it openly because it will create a bigger 'no' vote. A lot of people, especially the older workers, who don't like the contract have voted for it because they feel that the union will not do anything better. I know one guy who condemned a union leader for the sellout and then told me later that he voted 'yes.' But if he was more aware of the alternate 40-hour rule he would have voted 'no.'"

A new train operator complained about the difficulties of the job. "The quality of the job could be improved. Today I started my job at 9 a.m. Yesterday, it was 4 a.m., and tomorrow 9 a.m. This schedule messes with your body.

"They don't give you enough time to have lunch. It is sometimes difficult to properly have something to eat, and sometimes you don't get one at all.

"With an average apartment renting for about $2700 a month, our salary is not enough.

"Samuelsen says that the contract will protect us. But that is not true because no one knows what the politicians will do. It is difficult to learn politics when you are working all day. The upper classes spend all their time making things better for the upper class. They pass laws that favor them, their class, their friends, their businesses. But we have the power to change things."

Bus operator, Frank, with nine years' experience said, "The contract sucks. The $500 at the end is a joke. It might as well be zero. The union and the TA get what they want and there is nothing for us. We have to support our families.

"I have not heard of anyone who voted for it. The union is too comfortable. They did not even ask us what we want."

A bus operator with 10 years' experience who did not give his name said, "I don't agree with the clause that we will work four 10-hour days. This opens the door for part-time bus operators. The MTA buses (the private bus companies that have been taken over by the MTA) have part-time bus operators. This translates into a reduction of wages and benefits.

"The wage hike not only just barely keeps up with inflation, when you calculate the extra money we pay for union dues, it is a wage cut even before inflation rises even more."

Bus operator Jean said, "Due to the rising cost of living, with the overtime that we do, we work six days a week. Now they want us to work four days a week. I can't vote for this contract. There is not enough break time. When you get to the end of the line, there is no place to use a bathroom.

"The wages are not good. It should be at least 5 percent a year. If we had better wages, then we would only have to work five days a week instead of the six that so many of us have to do."

Edward, an MTA subway conductor, said, "The job is hazardous. I just had to fill out an injury on duty report.

"The union turns the other cheek on behalf of management, I don't agree with it. It sounds like this contract is not good. They only sent members a flyer or two with little information on the contract and then we are supposed to vote."

A train car cleaner on the station platform, who was just finished with the probation period declared, "We are the most junior people in here. The contract does nothing for us. It is a slap in the face.

"Even if we vote no, legally, we cannot strike.

"Housing costs are terrible. Have you seen the station at the end of the E line at the World Trade Center? It is a homeless city. There are 11 homeless people at night in one car. A house costs $400,000 to $500,000 now. How can you afford a mortgage for that? A two-bedroom apartment in East New York [a low-income area of Brooklyn] is $1600 to $1700 to rent."

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