New York transit union pushes through concessions contract

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The result of the vote on the new contract signed by Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) reflected the deep alienation of rank-and-file workers from the TWU. While the contract was ratified, less than one-third of those eligible to cast ballots voted to ratify the new 28-month-long deal. The result was largely a vote of no confidence in the TWU.

The union announced late last week that the deal had passed by a vote of 10,540 for and 4,571 against--a 70 to 30 percent margin. In a statement, TWU Local 100 President John Samuelsen said, "I want to thank rank-and-file transit workers for their strong show of support in ratifying this agreement with the MTA. They recognized that the contract provides wage increases and other economic enhancements that will keep transit workers ahead of inflation, and fully protects their health coverage and wins important medical benefit gains without the concessions that are enshrined in city and state public sector patterns."

Nothing Samuelsen said was true. First, the local represents about 38,000 bus and subway workers in four out of five of the boroughs of New York City. About 32,000 are "good standing" and eligible to vote because they have paid union dues. The TWU lost the automatic dues checkoff in retaliation for the 2005 strike, and some 6,000 workers have stopped or are behind on paying dues.

Of the 32,000 eligible to vote, only 10,540—less than a third—voted in favor of the deal, 28 percent of all transit workers. The 4,571 who voted against was substantial. Certain job titles defeated the deal or had large opposition, including train operators, who turned it down 803 to 517, conductor/tower workers, who defeated it 746 to 390, and track workers, where it barely passed, 412 to 364. There were also large numbers of workers who didn't like the settlement but voted for it because they knew the TWU would do nothing to get a better deal.

Samuelsen's claims about the contract were no more truthful. The wage hike amounts to 2.14 percent a year for the 28 months. The rate of inflation in the New York area was 2.5 percent between January 2016 and January 2017. That increase, the highest in nearly five years, is attributable mostly to the increase in housing and energy costs.

The deal also retains previous TWU-backed concessions, including increased health care costs and a longer waiting period for new workers to reach top pay. It also contains ominous language suggesting that the eight-hour day and the guaranteed 40-hour work week could be eliminated.

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 on the TWU and the MTA "to discuss a mutually agreed upon alternate work week schedule, working conditions and pay provisions." This section no doubt was the major reason train operators and the conductor-tower division defeated the deal.

Another section for the buses calls for discussions for "a four (4) day work week with the aim of…increasing employee availability…"

Behind the scenes, the TWU and MTA officials will conspire to eliminate overtime pay, which many workers depend on, and open the door to part-time and casual labor.

Samuelsen continued, "The potential of a national right-to-work bill and other destructive anti-trade union laws are likely coming our way. In this age of national political uncertainty, we must unite or risk great

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harm…”

The TWU bureaucrats are not complaining about Trump’s plans to cut Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, health benefits and occupational safety standards, and ending regulations on corporate power, let alone his anti-immigrant dragnet and plans for war. Instead Samuelsen is worried about the “harm” to the union bureaucracy’s income and institutional interests posed by so-called right-to-work legislation. The response of the TWU and other unions will be to double down on their efforts to prove to Trump the value of having the unions around to suppress social opposition and promote the nationalist filth needed for war.

The TWU endorsed Bernie Sanders’ efforts to provide a “left” cover for the Democrats and Hillary Clinton, the favored candidate of Wall Street and the military. It has a de facto alliance with New York’s Democratic governor, Andrew Cuomo, who has made a career of imposing austerity and attacking the rights of public employees. The TWU endorsed Cuomo, who has control over the MTA, in the last gubernatorial elections. The length of the contract allows Cuomo to enjoy “labor peace” until after his next election bid in November 2018.

Cuomo’s new budget will reduce MTA funding from $399 million last year to $244 this year—a 21 percent cut. MTA Chairman Veronique Hakim, who was recently appointed by Cuomo, claims the state cuts will not worsen service. Her rationale is that the authority has already reduced its annual operating costs by $1.6 billion annually over the last seven years—with supposedly no adverse effects.

Although the state has promised the MTA $8.3 billion for its capital improvement plan, Hakim admitted that she does not know how it will come up with the money.

In fact, state funding reductions have led to an explosion in the transit authority’s debt burden and its payments to wealthy bondholders and Wall Street. The MTA now has long term bond debt of almost $36 billion, projected to rise to more than $41 billion by 2020.

Both transit workers and the riding public have been squeezed—in the form of deteriorating living standards and more dangerous work conditions for transit workers, and higher fares, delays and a crumbling infrastructure for passengers.

The transit authority’s debt could be paid many times over by the 79 billionaires who reside in New York City and whose net worth is estimated to be $365 billion. This wealth is untouchable, say state and local Democrats and the national leaders of the party, including the senator from Wall Street, Charles “Chuck” Schumer.

In opposition to this union-management-government gang up, transit workers should elect rank-and-file committees and begin organizing to defend themselves against the consequences of this contract and the upcoming attacks of the Trump administration. These committees should establish lines of communication and the closest connections to teachers, hospital workers and other sections of workers and young people to prepare a powerful counter-offensive by the working class. Above all workers need a new leadership, which is independent of the two capitalist parties and is fighting for a radical redistribution of wealth and socialism. Transit workers should contact the Socialist Equality Party to take up this fight.

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