

New York transit agency seeks casualization of its workforce

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4 September 2019

On Monday, after months of total silence, Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 published on its website a list of unprecedented concessions being demanded by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) from its 40,000-strong New York City workforce whose old contract expired May 15.

Management's demands are not the standard negotiating tactics used as the basis for a reaching compromise settlement. They represent a declaration of war aimed at pulverizing every basic right of workers and imposing slave-labor conditions.

The MTA demands are typical of a process taking place across the US and, indeed, around the world. In response to the deepening worldwide crisis of capitalism, the ruling class is seeking to strip workers of every last gain and protection won in bitter struggle over the course of the last century. The goal is the total casualization of labor, the imposition of conditions that characterize what is popularly known as the "gig economy"—meager pay, few or no benefits, speedup, extreme 'flexibility' in job classification, outsourcing, and no job security.

Coming to prominence as part of the so-called auto bailout under the Obama administration in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the process of casualization is being implemented in industry after industry, with the collaboration of the unions. The proposals by the MTA epitomize this process. They include:

- An annual 2 percent wage increase that will take effect only 60 days after a full and final ratification by both sides. The next 2 percent increase takes place 365 days afterwards and so on. Since there is no retroactive money, this guarantees that the wage hike will be less than 2 percent per year, or less than 8 percent through the life of the contract.
- Doubling workers' contribution from their paychecks for their health care from 2 percent to 4 percent.
- A reduction in overtime pay. According to the MTA's proposal, an employee who works more than 8 hours in a day may not be paid overtime if the worker has not worked 40 hours in the week.

- The contracting out of station and car cleaning, construction flagging, and some capital construction work.

- The introduction of part-timers in the bus operator, train operator, and conductor positions.

- The elimination of the right by the employee to pick a job and days off according to seniority if the worker has been absent for 30 days or more, as in the case of illness.

- A huge reduction of vacation time for workers who have been on the job from three to nine years.

- The right of management to impose work rule changes if employee availability does not increase by a total of three days throughout the system. Connected with this, each department will set an annual productivity goal.

In advancing these demands, the MTA is banking on the spinelessness and treachery of the TWU.

Indeed, the previous concessions contracts imposed by the TWU have only whetted the MTA's appetite for more.

The TWU opened the door to contracting out by previously agreeing to allow management to use private contractors for some car- and station-cleaning jobs.

In the present round of negotiations, the TWU has not even called a rally, a tactic it has used in the past to dissipate worker anger. The union only broke its silence a few days after the MTA held a special board meeting last Friday where it vilified the workforce for supposed abuse of overtime.

The meeting focused on a report commissioned by the transit authority, which complained that the agency spent \$1.3 billion in overtime last year, a 53 percent increase from 2014. Its operating budget was about \$16.6 billion.

The MTA, which is the largest transit agency in the country, oversees the New York City bus and subway system, two commuter railroads, and a multitude of bridges and tunnels. The rail and bus system as a whole carries an average of 11 million passengers a day, and about 850,000 vehicles daily pass through its bridges and tunnels.

New York City transit itself paid \$900 million in overtime in 2018, a 16 percent increase over last year. The Long Island Rail Road paid \$218 million in overtime last year, a

20 percent increase from the previous year.

Carrie Cohen, who presented the report, maintained that there is “A complete lack of controls for overtime and time keeping leav[ing] the MTA completely vulnerable and little to deter fraud, waste, and abuse.”

The MTA finance chair, Larry Schwartz, a former top aide and ally of Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, vehemently pushed the audit. In a TV interview, he threatened workers, declaring that “people need to either go to jail, they need to be prosecuted, and we need to collect the money that they stole from the taxpaying public.”

It was Cuomo, himself, who originally launched the attack on transit workers by asserting that “This is about stealing. This is about fraud.”

In reality, the increase in overtime was the outcome of the authority’s attempt to reverse years of deteriorating service as a result of deferred maintenance. Cuomo, two years ago, declared a state of emergency, dubbing it the Subway Action Plan. Facing pressure from transit riders, the MTA, which is a state agency and effectively run by the governor, hired workers to do overtime rather than hire new employees. It is now seeking to force transit workers to work overtime without being properly compensated.

Despite all the anti-worker rhetoric, Cohen admitted the report did not investigate the question of overtime fraud. Further, the report noted an underlying manpower shortage, creating the need for the overtime.

In an attempt to pit transit workers against the public, Chairman Patrick Foye, a Cuomo appointee, threatened unspecified bus and subway service cuts this fall, due to the agency’s growing financial crisis. This would represent yet another attack on transit users, who just experienced a 4 percent fare and toll hike about five months ago.

At the meeting, Foye referred to a current \$200 million operating deficit that could grow to \$1 billion by 2023. In addition, the MTA has a whopping \$43 billion long-term bond debt.

Among other things, the report recommended using a biometric time clock, which is expected to be installed system-wide by the end of the year.

Schwartz threatened to hold up agency spending requests unless the authority imposes work rule changes recommended by the report. This is a threat that the MTA will impose on other divisions the same contractual demands that it is making against the New York City Transit Authority workers. A number of the workers for the Long Island Railroad have been working without a new contract since either April or May depending on their job category.

This planned attack on the transit workforce is taking place right after the MTA board decided to accept a reorganization plan that streamlines the agency and is expected to eliminate

about 2,700 jobs, approximately 4 percent out of a workforce of 74,000.

At the board meeting, John Samuelsen, who is a non-voting board member, former president of TWU local 100, and current president of the local’s parent organization, condemned Schwartz’s attack on transit workers. However, Samuelsen has aggressively supported Governor Cuomo for years, handing him \$275,000 for his electoral campaigns.

Samuelsen told reporters for the *New York Times* at one of Cuomo’s governor’s lavish fundraising affairs that “the governor has been the best governor for the trade union movement ever.” This was just the latest example of how the union seeks to entirely subordinate the working class to the interests of big business and its political representatives, primarily in the Democratic Party.

The transit agency’s planned attacks on New York transit workers and riders are part of a broad demand by the corporations for austerity and sacrifice from working people all over the country, and internationally. The transit report, issued by the Morrison & Foerster law firm, also claimed that the same issues exist in transit systems throughout the country and in particular named Washington, D.C., the Massachusetts Bay Area, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

The consequences of the drive toward the casualization of labor can clearly be seen in the auto industry, where a substantial portion of the workforce is now composed of temporary part-time (TPT) workers, who have low pay, few if any benefits, and no job security, but must still pay union dues. This is the future the MTA wants to impose on transit workers with the TWU’s assistance. It is the future faced by all workers under capitalism’s insatiable drive to maximize profits.

At the same time, there is a growing hostility by working people to these conditions, as shown by the overwhelming strike authorization vote by autoworkers in advance of their contract expiration in mid-September. However, workers face implacable opponents not just in the ranks of management but from the unions themselves. To wage an effective fight, workers must break the grip of the unions and their political subordination to the Democratic Party through the formation of independent rank-and-file organizations to unite all workers in a common struggle against the employers.



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