

# New York City transit workers and the fight for social equality

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As 40,000 New York City bus and subway workers remain on the job after five-and-a-half months without a contract, there is increasing sentiment for a counter-offensive against the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's demands to impose draconian concessions.

The brewing fightback, however, is not simply a struggle against a single transit agency. It is part of a broader battle by the whole working class against the capitalist system and both corporate-controlled parties. In order to pump more profits into the pockets of the financial aristocracy, the Democrats and Republicans are starving vital services of resources and seeking to reduce workers to the conditions of virtual slavery.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), on behalf of Democratic governor Andrew Cuomo and backed by Wall Street, is attempting to implement a far-reaching restructuring of the public transit sector. Its demands go beyond "normal" wage and benefit cutting. Instead, the MTA is demanding an expanded use of contractors, an introduction of part-time employment for subway and bus personnel, and the abolition of the eight-hour day. It also wants to reduce vacation time and impose penalties on workers who become ill.

Following the model of such "gig economy" companies as Uber and Amazon, government agencies want to make temporary, part-time labor with poverty wages and few benefits the norm in the public sector as well.

Transit officials announced a plan to cut between 1,900 and 2,700 jobs over the next three years, first through attrition then via layoffs. Already the agency has eliminated 79 subway cleaning jobs, with the go-ahead of the union, as they move to purge the system of higher-paid and more experience transit workers and replace them with low paid contractors and temps whom they can exploit without limit.

This attack is combined with service cuts, fare hikes and a new tax on drivers. The MTA recently axed 11 bus routes and is currently "reviewing the possibility" of scaling back or eliminating more subway and bus service. Fare hikes are now an annual occurrence, which will be supplemented in 2021 with a congestion pricing scheme, a regressive tax on drivers pushed through by governor Cuomo with support of Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio and Transport Workers Union (TWU) local 100.

Cuomo and the MTA have also engaged in a cynical public relations campaign to blame the fiscal crisis on workers supposedly abusing overtime and then on "fare-beaters." Some 500 cops have been added to crack down on passengers avoiding fares, a move hailed by the TWU, and police have been assigned to spy on workers clocking in and out of work.

The cause of the MTA's growing debt, now estimated at \$44 billion and rising, is not transit workers or working-class passengers trying to eke by. It is the result of the looting of the city by the super-rich. The MTA is one of the largest issuers in the \$3.8 trillion municipal-bond market and its bonds are found in the portfolios of the richest people looking for havens from municipal taxes. In addition to paying interest to these wealthy bondholders, the MTA also pays out millions in fees to banks like Barclays, Goldman Sachs, Bank of America/Morgan Stanley and Merrill Lynch.

Under capitalism everything goes to the rich. There are unlimited resources to bail out Wall Street, provide unlimited corporate tax cuts and wage endless wars. The ballooning stock market allows the ultra-wealthy to shuttle from luxury townhouse to penthouse suite, while workers fight for wages that barely cover rent and homeless take shelter in the subway system.

Transit workers are fighting alongside striking teachers in Chicago, GM and other autoworkers, and masses of workers and youth from Chile to Lebanon who are pouring into the streets in unprecedented numbers to oppose social inequality.

The main obstacle to the unification of the working class are the trade unions, like the Transport Workers Union, which are allied with the Democrats and defend without question the capitalist system and the economic and political dictatorship of the financial elite. The United Auto Workers union just betrayed the 40-day strike of GM workers, accepting the closure of plants and a vast expansion of temps. In Chicago, the teachers' union is scrambling to end the two-week strike of 25,000 educators.

Today is the first major rally called by the TWU after nearly half a year without a contract. While the MTA has put forward its demands for blood, the TWU has refrained from articulating any demands for improved conditions for transit workers. The last thing the TWU wants is a strike. That is not just because it fears fines and losing automatic dues checkoff, but above all because it would win popular support and could become the catalyst of a direct confrontation with the union-aligned Democratic Party.

As former Local 100 president and current TWU national president John Samuelsen told a *New York Times* reporter, as he was caught leaving a lavish fundraising affair of businessmen for Cuomo, “the governor has been the best governor for the trade union movement ever.”

If transit workers are to take forward their struggle, they must take the initiative in their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file workplace committees, which are independent of the TWU and based on what transit workers and their families need not what the corporate-controlled politicians and union bureaucrats say is affordable.

These committees should demand a 40 percent wage hike to offset years of stagnating wages, the conversion of all second-tier, temp and contract workers into full-time workers with full pay and benefits, and the extension of industrial democracy, including workers' control over safety and working conditions.

Transit workers must unite with every other section of the working class—logistics and retail workers, teachers, health care and service workers and college

and high school youth—to build up a political counter-offensive of the working class against the capitalist system and for socialism.

A radical redistribution of society's wealth to meet the needs of the majority will not be achieved through appeals to the conscience of the rich or through the capitalist Democratic Party, like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez claim. It will only be achieved through a frontal assault on the private fortunes of the super-rich and the expropriation of their ill-gotten gains. The debts owed to the banks and wealthy bondholders must be canceled as part of a program of transforming the giant banks and corporations into public enterprises collectively owned and democratically controlled by the working class.

Transit workers are not facing a limited trade union struggle but a political fight, which requires mobilizing the entire working class to fight for socialism. The Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site* are fighting to build the revolutionary leadership for this struggle. We urge you to contact us to get involved!



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