

Job actions by New York City transit workers

Alan Whyte

27 November 2019

Last Friday, bus operators at the Jackie Gleason Bus Depot in Brooklyn asked for safety inspections before taking out their buses, which resulted in a substantial slowing down of scheduled routes in the Sunset Park neighborhood.

The Transport Workers Union called the job action because TWU officials fear they will not be able to impose the draconian demands of the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) without a rebellion by rank-and-file workers whom the TWU has kept on the job six months after their contract expired. The Democratic Party, which controls the state agency that operates New York City's subway and bus system, wants major concessions from the MTA's 40,000 workers, including an expansion of part-time work and increased health care contributions.

With anger growing, the TWU is doing everything it can to avoid a strike. TWU Local 100 President Tony Utano has floated the possibility that the union will engage in a work-to-rule slowdown during the holiday shopping season. When asked by WPIX television recently if he is considering calling a strike, Utano adamantly declared, "We're not."

Strikes by public transit workers are illegal under the state's anti-worker Taylor Law and can result in hefty fines against the workers and the union. After the 2005 transit strike, the state ended the automatic deduction of union dues from workers, something the TWU does not want to repeat under any circumstances.

Though work-to-rule protests are not illegal, transit chief Andy Byford warned that "Any action by TWU Local 100 that slows down bus service for riders in Brooklyn or anywhere in NYC is not acceptable."

The TWU knows that the patience of MTA subway and bus workers is wearing thin. Workers have been without a contract since May 15, and the MTA has proposed more givebacks with each succeeding negotiating session with the union.

Contract talks broke down on November 14, leaving the union flat-footed. Utano declared, "We sat in negotiations for three days and each proposal they come back with was

more and more insulting. ... [MTA Chairman Pat] Foye presented us with a new set of demands today that are substantially worse than the insulting package he threw across the table three months ago."

While Utano did not specify what givebacks the MTA was asking for, the purpose of the MTA's original demands is to eliminate the guaranteed 40-hour week and drive workers into the growing casualized workforce, including the introduction of part-timers, outsourcing to cheap labor contractors. In addition, the MTA is demanding the reduction of overtime pay, attacking seniority rights and seeking to give management the unilateral right to impose work rule changes if employee availability does not increase by a total of three days per worker throughout the system.

The MTA's "proposal" also includes the doubling of workers' contribution for their health care from 2 to 4 percent, and offering a wage increase below 2 percent per year.

Workers in the New York commuter railroads, the Long Island Railroad and Metro North, which are other constituent parts of the MTA, are also working without new contracts.

While verbally criticizing MTA officials, the TWU, for years, has aggressively supported Democrat Governor Andrew Cuomo, who has directed the MTA's assault on transit workers. Local 100 is hoping that workers have forgotten the days, not long ago, when it called Cuomo a huge friend of the unions and gave him \$275,000 of workers' money for his election campaigns.

What motivates the governor, the MTA, and the entire political establishment to line up against transit workers was revealed in a press release from the MTA's CEO Robert Foran that was issued last week, which pointed to the severe debt burden of the agency. In its \$17 billion budget and its four-year financial plan, the MTA projected an operating deficit of \$426 million by 2023.

Foran said the MTA had to "aggressively cut costs as we embark on a historic transformation" in order to save \$1.6 billion. The savings would cut 2,700 administrative

positions and 1,300 subway and bus maintainers. It would also require raising fares by 4 percent every two years, as it has done routinely. A critical component of these “savings” would be part of the massive givebacks and labor casualization in the contract now being negotiated with the TWU.

While gutting the livelihoods and working conditions of transit workers, the MTA will continue to pour billions in debt payments to the hedge funds that control the transit agency’s bonds, which have long been a lucrative tax shelter for the city’s millionaires and billionaires. Sixteen percent of the annual operating budget goes to paying off the ever-expanding debt load and the expenses associated with the interest rate swaps and financial maneuvers by top Wall Street banks—and this is expected to increase in coming years.

The demands of the giant bondholders were spelled out by the pro-business Citizens Budget Commission (CBC) last April in a report, tellingly subtitled “Labor’s Participation Needed to Improve the MTA’s Financial Outlook.” The report calls for “increasing employee health care contributions,” reduction of pension benefits, and productivity improvements that should be agreed on by both sides. Predictably, the CBC did not call on the city’s 103 billionaires to make any sacrifices.

Passengers who ride the buses and subways will also be gouged to offset the MTA’s financial crisis. The agency raised fares by 4 percent in July and plans to raise them by 4 percent again in 2021. Since 2007, transit fares have grown by 62 percent or three times faster than inflation and the growth in wages, according to the New York State Comptroller’s report issued in September.

Pushed by Cuomo, and with the blessing of Democratic Mayor Bill De Blasio, the state legislature passed a regressive congestion pricing tax on vehicles coming into lower Manhattan south of 60th street, which will be implemented as early as Jan 1, 2021.

Ostensibly, the expected \$1 billion in annual revenue would be used to help fund the MTA. But in reality, the money will be used to leverage a further \$15 billion in bond debt for the agency’s capital spending and only increase the agency’s debt, which now runs at \$44 billion.

Despite this financial crunch, the agency plans on hiring 500 police officers in addition to the current 2,700 to patrol the subway system, which will cost it nearly \$250 million over the next four years—in other words, more than half the projected operating deficit.

The proposal to place more cops on the transit system is again driven by Governor Cuomo, who has said that the

police will be cracking down on homelessness, panhandling, and so-called fare evaders. The measure is aimed at turning the mass transit system into a police state against both its workers and the riders.

In the last two weeks alone, passengers have posted videos of cops using excessive force. In one incident, at least 10 officers surrounded and drew their weapons on a young alleged fare beater.

Transit workers and the riders have been pitted in a struggle not only against the MTA, but against both big business parties and the capitalist system, which are responsible for the grotesque levels of social inequality that characterize every aspect of life in the nation’s most populous city. Everything is for the rich, while workers, black, white and immigrant, struggle for survival every day.

Social tensions in New York City are at a boiling point. Transit workers don’t need impotent stunts organized by the TWU to harmlessly blow off steam. They need to take the struggle into their own hands through the building of rank-and-file workplace committees to prepare a real fight to mobilize the full strength of the working class, including the millions of teachers and other municipal employees, logistics, retail and other workers who all face the same fight.

The industrial mobilization of the working class must be combined with a political struggle to break from the Democrats and Republicans and fight for the replacement of the capitalist system with socialism. This means the cancellation of the massive public debts, the expropriation of the ill-gotten wealth of the super-rich and the transformation of the banks into public enterprises democratically controlled and collectively owned by the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact