

“The union bosses tell us they are fighting for us while they sell us out”

New York City transit workers denounce union-backed tentative agreement

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Anger is growing among 37,000 New York City transit workers against the combined efforts of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), the Democratic Party, and Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 to impose a tentative contract deal with unprecedented demands for austerity and productivity.

The essence of the agreement is to incorporate the TWU as an integral part of management to increase the transit agency’s exploitation of its workers, for which the union bureaucracy will be financially rewarded.

On Wednesday, the union published on its website its Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the MTA that gives more details of the sellout agreement. The MOA, however, is written in a way that covers up, among other things, the amount of money workers will lose.

But a press release by the MTA boasts to Wall Street and the big business politicians just how much the agency will save off the backs of transit workers. For example, the MOA states, “The parties anticipate that at least a one-and-a-half-day improvement in employee availability will be achieved. For each additional improvement above one (1) day in Overall Employee Availability, the Union and the MTA will share equally in the savings as they shall determine.”

According to the MTA press release this increase of employee availability will save the agency an estimated \$17 million a year.

Then the MOA states, “The parties agree that equalization of overtime is an important priority ... existing contractual provisions will be enforced to achieve this priority.” According to the MTA press release, the reduction of overtime will save the agency another estimated \$17 million a year.

According to the MOA, joint union-management productivity committees for train car equipment maintenance will also be established. “The parties will

create a Productivity Committee,” the agreement states, which “will review and evaluate mutually agreed upon productivity gains with the goal of achieving savings to be divided equally between the NYCT [New York City Transit, the unit of the MTA in four boroughs of the city] and the union to increase pay for Maintainers.” The same language exists for the bus maintainers.

This is not being proposed to increase of pay of train care or bus maintainers, but to give the Authority savings in productivity increases. As the MTA press release puts it, “The agreement includes a suite of provisions that, combined and enacted in partnership with the TWU, will ensure the MTA continues to deliver on the improvements in operations while realizing savings for the financial plan.”

On the critical issue of outsourcing, the MOA states, “The Authority intends to enter into subcontracts for the deep cleaning of approximately 160–180 stations, commencing on or about February 18, 2020 and ending on or about February 18, 2021 ...”

The union had earlier this year agreed to allow the MTA to hire an outside contractor to do such cleaning under a supposed one-time provision. However, this was not a part of the then-existing contract. With the inclusion of the deep cleaning provision in the MOA, it is clear the union is sanctioning further outsourcing and will become an overseer of cheap, contract labor.

The MOA calls for cutbacks in the employee health plan, including increases in emergency room co-pays to \$100, increases for non-generic drugs, \$20 for brand name and \$40 for non-formulary medicine. According to the MTA press this “will deliver \$27 million in savings.”

It has been estimated by the MTA that the wages hikes amount to nearly \$350 million over the four years of the contract and the concessions amount to \$176 million over the same period. This alone puts the wages increases

significantly below the rate of inflation, amounting to a cut in real wages.

The deal, however, opens the door to much greater productivity concessions with the union apparatus holding the slavemaster's whip.

Not only will workers work more for less, but they will be asked to police the subway and bus systems and pit themselves against the more than eight million passengers who ride the bus and subway system every day. The MOA states, "The parties agree to meet and confer to work collaboratively on new initiatives as may be mutually agreed upon to aid the MTA in reducing fare evasion."

Despite the additional financial strain on the authority, Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, who is in effect the head of the MTA, a state agency, has been pushing for the addition of 500 cops in the mass transit system primarily to catch so-called fare beaters. Now the TWU will function as an auxiliary police force against the working poor who face difficulty paying the \$2.75 fare in addition to the high costs of food, housing, health care and other necessities in one of the world's most expensive cities.

The TWU has for decades supported both the Democratic and Republican big-business parties, and, in recent years has been supporting Cuomo, who launched a vicious assault against transit workers last year berating them as "overtime criminals."

What is driving the union's growing collaboration with the transit agency is the MTA's increasingly unmanageable bond debt, now at \$44 billion. The additional money squeezed out of transit workers and commuters will go to pay off the billionaires and multi-millionaires who invest in municipal bonds as a lucrative tax shelter.

The TWU is following a well-worn path. The Amalgamated Transit Union has just cut a deal covering Washington, DC metro workers that will sharply cut labor costs and essentially impose privatized conditions on the transit system's 7,800 train and bus workers. The United Auto Workers has sanctioned the vast expansion of temporary workers after being caught taking millions in bribes from the auto companies in exchange for sweetheart contracts.

Even before the MOA was posted, a WSWS reporting team spoke to many workers distrustful of both the union and the tentative deal. John, a bus operator, said, "Now, they want to make us pay \$100 to go to the Emergency Room. What happens if one of your kids has an asthma attack? Where are you supposed to go? They also want to make medicine co-pays go up if you don't get a generic medicine. My diabetes medications don't have a generic version. So, my high blood pressure medicine co-pay is doubling from \$20 to \$40. The wage increase doesn't add up because of

these health care cuts. I don't agree with switching shifts to lose overtime."

Sean, a bus operator, said, "The union is in bed with the man. They give us a contract to vote yes or no but I think everything is already written in stone, and that they just give us a ballot to make us feel better."

Another worker said, "The union doesn't care about us, and the new agreement shows this. We never get any improvements." He explained that he didn't go to the union rally on October 30 because "I don't want to hear a load of politicians and the union bosses telling us they fight for us while they sell us out and make so much money."

Another transit worker, Ivan, said about the contract, "From what I have heard it stinks. They already have it from covering from three years to four years and aren't sharing the whole thing. They want to rationalize the givebacks."

Derick complained, "They are still going to have [outside] contractors because it is cheaper."

The ballots on the agreement are being mailed out December 18 and will be counted January 9. Transit workers should discuss the contract independently of the union and build up the momentum to reject this sellout deal. But that is not enough. Workers will have to form rank-and-file workplace committees, led by the most class conscious and militant workers, to take the conduct of the negotiations and the contract struggle out of the hands of the TWU and put them under the democratic control of workers themselves.

These committees must fight for what transit workers and their families need, not what the corporate and financial elites, their servants in Albany and City Hall and the TWU say is affordable. Rank-and-file committees should reach out to working class commuters, municipal workers and every section of workers and young people to organize a powerful industrial and political counteroffensive against austerity and social inequality.

It is a lie to claim there is "no money" for improved living standards when New York City is home to one of the largest concentrations of billionaires in the world. The fight to guarantee the social rights of workers, however, requires a frontal assault on this concentrated wealth, the transformation of the Wall Street banks into publicly owned enterprises and the socialist reorganization of economic life to meet human needs, not private profit.



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