

Mass abstention as union pushes through New York City transit contract

Alan Whyte**16 January 2020**

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 announced January 9 that the concessions contract it had reached with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority had been ratified. According to the American Arbitration Association, which counted the votes, only 15,288 of the 35,650 workers who were qualified to vote—or 43 percent—returned their mail-in ballots. The final tally was 10,112 for and 5,176 against.

Far from indicating support for the contract, the boycott of the ratification process by a majority of members was a vote of no confidence in the TWU. Even those who cast ballots in favor of the deal did so reluctantly, knowing even if they rejected it the TWU would not come back with anything better. Another 1,000 transit workers who had previously stopped paying dues out of disgust with the TWU were told they could not vote on the deal.

Not once since the contract expired last May 15 did the TWU suggest it would conduct a serious fight against the precedent-setting concessions contract. On the contrary, TWU officials collaborated with the MTA and New York's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo to force workers to pay for the massive debt of the transit system, which is held by Wall Street and wealthy bondholders.

Before the vote, union officials issued a flyer that omitted any mention of the huge concessions which they agreed to. They refused to call a mass membership meeting before the vote, a tradition for 20 years, out of fear that workers would raise too many questions and revolt against union officials pushing the deal.

Although the union has been agreeing to concession settlements for decades, in this agreement, for the first time, the TWU bureaucracy has formally established itself as a paid-off layer of management that is tasked with increasing workers' productivity and availability.

The agreement, which is retroactive to May 15, provides for the TWU bureaucracy to be financially rewarded for increasing overall employee availability (i.e. a reduction in absences for which a substitute worker would receive overtime) above one day. The MTA estimates that this will save the agency \$17 million a year.

The union has also agreed to equalize and thereby reduce overtime, which is estimated would save the authority another \$17 million a year. A portion of these and other cost reductions will be funneled back to the TWU, according to the contract.

Joint union-management productivity committees have been established for train car equipment and bus maintainers. The amount of money that the MTA will save on this is open-ended.

The agreement calls for subcontracting to outside firms the deep cleaning of about 160-180 stations from February 2020 to February 2021. The union had agreed last year to allow the MTA to engage in such subcontracting, which employs cheap labor, that was previously prohibited by contract language.

The agreement cuts back on the employee health plan by increasing emergency room co-pays to \$100, as well as co-pay increases for pharmaceuticals. The MTA estimates that will save it \$27 million.

In addition to this, the contract calls on transit workers to act as police to reduce "fare evasion." The union has committed itself to pitting the transit workforce against the more than 8 million working people who ride the system every day and who have been subjected to fare hikes of 4 percent every two years, estimated to be three times above both wage increases and the rate-of-inflation.

Over the years, the TWU has supported both Democratic and Republican party politicians, including

the current New York state Governor Cuomo, a Democrat. Cuomo essentially runs the MTA, which is a state agency. He has condemned transit workers as “overtime criminals” and has called for 500 new cops to catch so-called “fare beaters”.

With this contract, the TWU has been transformed into a paid-off agent of the MTA. In this respect, it is following the footsteps of other pro-capitalist and nationalist unions around the world, from the GGT in France, which is subsidized by the government and is attempting to sell out the massive strikes against pension cuts, to the United Auto Workers whose top officials have been convicted of taking millions in bribes in exchange for signing pro-company sweetheart contracts and embezzling union dues.

The transit authority, which is a public agency, is not legally able to hand out money to union officials in the form of direct bribes. Instead, through the provisions in the new contract, the MTA will divert a portion of its massive savings to the TWU, which will have a financial incentive to increase the rate of exploitation of the workforce.

If the membership had voted down the deal, the union would have proceeded to impose it or some version of it by using arbitration provisions contained in the state’s anti-worker Taylor Law, which prohibits strikes by public employees. The huge number of workers who did not vote indicates that they understand this reality.

Transit workers are debating what to do now. Some have discussed forming another union and other various kinds of protests and appeals to the MTA or to the state. Some feel that a new leadership can be elected that would reform the union. But none of these solutions will affect any change at all.

The TWU, like the UAW and other unions, completely accept and support the capitalist system. This means imposing unending austerity on workers to fuel the ever expanding stock market bubble, as seen with the Dow Jones hitting 29,000 points Wednesday.

The driving force behind this concession deal is the increasingly out-of-control bond debt of the MTA and the need to pay off the banks and the wealthy bondholders. This debt burden is now about \$44 billion and growing exponentially. It is part and parcel of the almost \$4 trillion US municipal bond debt, itself an expression of the fact that the entire capitalist system is kept afloat solely due to an astronomical amount of

debt, for which the corporate heads and their political representatives in both major parties are determined to make the working class pay.

That is why the fight to secure a decent standard of living for transit workers, or to guarantee any other social right, from high quality public education to affordable health care and a secure retirement, is not possible without a political struggle by the working class against the capitalist system and for a radical redistribution of society’s wealth. This means the fight for socialist policies, including the expropriation of the private fortunes of the super-rich and the transformation of the Wall Street banks into public enterprises collectively owned and democratically controlled by the working class.

Transit workers need a new organization of struggle: rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of the TWU and other pro-capitalist unions, which are committed to fight for what workers and their families need not what the big business politicians say is affordable. These committees must unite transit workers with teachers and other city workers and the millions of working class people in New York, throughout the US and internationally to begin an industrial and political counter-offensive against the capitalist system.



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