

Sickout cripples New Jersey commuter rail service

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A sickout by New Jersey Transit train engineers Friday led to scores of cancellations throughout the day and an abrupt end to service out of New York City at 8:05 p.m., bringing the third largest commuter rail system in the country to a halt.

The immediate trigger for the job action was the refusal of the agency to provide engineers with holiday pay for Juneteenth, which was observed Friday for New Jersey employees. All other state workers, including those at New Jersey Transit who have signed new contracts, received either paid time off or bonus pay for working the holiday.

The spokesperson for the transit agency said they received nearly three times the usual number of sick calls on Friday compared to a typical weekday.

The action by New Jersey Transit engineers comes as a wave of transportation workers' struggles is brewing around the globe, including a nationwide strike of 50,000 rail workers in the United Kingdom scheduled for this week. In the US, 140,000 freight railroad workers are increasingly restless amid two years of contract negotiations that have left them working for low pay under deplorable conditions. On the West Coast, 20,000 dockworkers are preparing to strike when their contract lapses at the end of the month.

These struggles of transportation workers are part of a growing rebellion across industries. Workers have seen their wages stagnate as the cost of gas, food, housing, and other necessities has soared. Inflation at the current rate of 8.6 percent has meant massive wage cuts in real terms, while short staffing, speedups, and mass infection from COVID-19 have led to intolerable working conditions.

At New Jersey Transit, the more than 400 train engineers have not seen a dime in increased wages since 2019. The transportation agency has sought to

replicate agreements with the 14 other New Jersey Transit unions, which pushed through deals setting annual wage increases between 2 and 3 percent. After inflation, these insulting contracts amount to a 5 to 6 percent wage cut.

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) and New Jersey Transit have been in talks for nearly three years on a new collective bargaining agreement covering engineers, including over a year of federal mediation.

The sickout is a sign that workers are increasingly restless and unwilling to accept the same old endless process of mediation, which has led only to concessions for decades. The last contract was reached in 2016 after five years of negotiations, federal mediation, and two presidential emergency boards. A coalition of 11 unions called off a strike at the 11th hour based on a miserable agreement that provided just approximately 2.3 percent wage increases per year offset by substantial health care givebacks.

The experience of transit workers throughout the ongoing pandemic adds to the mood of militancy. New Jersey has been among the hardest hit of any state, with approximately 34,000 dead to date, the seventh most per capita. At least 26 New Jersey Transit employees died of COVID-19, maintaining bus and rail service despite massive outbreaks in the region.

Transit workers around the country are experiencing the same mix of dangerous job conditions and deteriorating pay. Across the Hudson River, New York City transit workers, who have lost more than 170 colleagues to the pandemic, received a contractual wage increase of just 2.75 percent last month over the previous year, a loss of nearly 6 percent after inflation.

New Jersey Transit responded to Friday's sickout with legal action, securing a temporary restraining

order from a US district court on Sunday prohibiting further sickouts or other work stoppages. BLET ordered its members Sunday to comply with the order, seeking to prevent the sickout from transforming into an open struggle.

Along with threatening workers, New Jersey Transit is hypocritically seeking to drive a wedge between train engineers and the more than 100,000 daily rail commuters, blaming workers fighting to make ends meet for the inconvenience due to canceled trains.

Yet the policies pursued by the Democratic administration in New Jersey, along with their counterparts in both parties throughout the country, have resulted in recurring outbreaks of COVID that have caused massive disruption to bus and rail service. For instance, when the Omicron wave first hit New Jersey last December, mass illness by workers forced the cancellation of 125 trains. Since then, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy has lifted virtually all of the mitigation measures in place to contain outbreaks, including rescinding the mask mandate for trains and buses in April.

Despite the efforts of New Jersey Transit, there is widespread support for the struggle of train engineers. The action was widely applauded by New York City transit workers, who also complained on social media about the refusal of the Transport Workers Union Local 100 to organize any similar action.

Among riders, too, there is immense sympathy. One stranded commuter commented to ABC News, “I’m not happy they’re striking, but just give them what they want, for God’s sake,” Amr Ahmad said. “If it’s for the benefit of the employees, then I’m good with canceled [trains].”



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