

37,000 New York City transit workers face fight against Democrats' austerity program when contract expires May 15

Daniel de Vries, Alan Whyte
1 May 2023

Are you a transit worker? Fill out the form at the end of this article for more information about forming a rank-and-file committee for the upcoming contract battle.

Nearly 40,000 New York City subway and bus workers are heading into a direct confrontation with the Democratic-controlled state and city government over the terms of a new labor agreement with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). The current agreement between Transport Workers Union Local 100 and the MTA expires on May 15.

New York City is the wealthiest city in the world, according to a new report released last month, with 58 billionaires, 740 centi-millionaires and 340,000 high-net-worth individuals, defined as people worth over \$1 million. Nevertheless, state and city officials have been using a potential funding meltdown of the MTA to push back against the demands of transit workers for wage increases that protect them against skyrocketing living expenses and other major improvements.

Negotiations have been ongoing for three weeks, according to TWU officials. The immediate funding crisis that hung over the first two weeks was partially resolved late last week when state legislators and New York Governor Kathy Hochul reached a budget deal, which included a so-called rescue package for the MTA. The deal, which still must be voted on, includes an estimated \$1.1 billion in additional tax revenues from large employers, one-off injections of \$300 million by the state and \$165 million by the city.

While the budget deal avoids the immediate crippling of subway and bus service and ensures the agency can make its debt payments to powerful bondholders like financial investment giant BlackRock, it by no means fully funds the agency. The MTA holds an outstanding debt of more than \$48 billion and relies more heavily on revenues from ridership—greatly reduced by the pandemic—than any other large transit agency in the country.

Over the course of decades, Democrats and Republicans have starved public transit in New York City and around the country of financing. The investments that have been made to maintain a crumbling system are financed by debt, to the point where the MTA currently allocates 18 percent of its operational budget to

pay off bondholders. Meanwhile, unlimited public funds are mobilized to bail out First Republic and other banks and fund the US proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the military buildup against China.

Even with the state funding, New York City transit fares will be raised by 4 percent, imposing a major burden on working class riders, already struggling to keep up with rising food, housing and other costs. After hypocritically hailing transit workers as “essential workers” and “heroes” and forcing them to sacrifice their lives and health during the pandemic, state officials, with the complicity of the TWU bureaucracy, are planning to impose the rest of the debt burden on the backs of transit workers.

The latest budget deal brokered by Governor Hochul, whom the TWU “enthusiastically” endorsed in last year’s election, is a continuation of the longstanding practice of state transit funding of giving with one hand and taking away with the other. Hochul’s initial proposal in January for a transit rescue package was contingent upon \$400 million in “efficiencies,” a euphemism for attacks on workers. The MTA, at its board meeting in April, reported that it was fully committed to implementing these cuts, including by increasing employee “availability.” In other words, they are seeking to force fewer employees to work more. The headcount at the MTA is already significantly below budgeted levels, with 68,731 agency-wide currently working compared to 73,649 authorized positions.

Transit workers must prepare now to mobilize their full strength to win the demands they need, including inflation-busting wage increases, the restoration of cost-of-living protections, adequate paid time off and fully funded health care and pension benefits.

The sordid record of the TWU bureaucracy—including the betrayal of the 2005 strike and the concessionary contracts since—makes it clear that despite the rhetoric of TWU President Richard Davis, the TWU apparatus is preparing to impose another sellout contract. That is why workers must organize rank-and-file committees to transfer decision-making and power from the TWU apparatus to the workers who operate and maintain the subways and buses.

These committees must reach out to the hundreds of thousands of teachers and other city workers to prepare common strike action against austerity and any efforts to use the anti-democratic Taylor Law to prevent workers from exercising their fundamental right to withhold their labor until their elemental demands are met.

The last contract, signed by TWU Local 100 officials on the eve of the pandemic, not only granted health care concessions but also included a union-management partnership scheme to increase productivity. It created a financial incentive for the union bureaucracy to reduce the amount of overtime and sick days taken by workers. The TWU also agreed to a side deal with the MTA earlier this year to remove station agents from the subway booth, a prelude to eliminating the job function altogether.

The world has changed dramatically since the last four-year contract. Workers have paid heavily both from the pandemic and the rising cost of living. More than 170 MTA workers have thus far died from COVID-19, including at least 110 subway and bus workers in Local 100. In addition, many more have suffered from Long COVID, a highly debilitating disease that causes such symptoms as brain fog and extreme fatigue, among other life-altering ailments.

As it stands, workers come under extra scrutiny for taking more than a fraction of the sick days they have accrued. Many who are ill must notify the sick desk upon leaving and returning to their home and are subject to inspectors verifying their whereabouts. Transit workers liken it to being under house arrest. Especially under conditions of an ongoing pandemic, these abusive policies will lead to more deaths and disease. Workers need unlimited sick time when infected with communicable diseases to protect their own health and that of their colleagues and passengers.

The MTA's cruel leave policies also impose severe burdens on pregnant women and parents of newborns, who must choose between losing pay or returning to work two weeks after the birth of their child.

Workers last received a pay raise in May 2022 of just 2.75 percent when inflation soared to 8.6 percent, a massive pay cut in real terms amid ongoing illness and a deteriorating social crisis. The cost of housing, in particular, is astronomical in New York, with many workers priced out of the city they serve. Workers need massive wage increases to make up for years of declining living standards and a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) to ensure they are insulated from runaway inflation.

The needs of workers for a transformation in their job conditions stand in contrast to what the TWU bureaucracy is preparing. The union's list of demands presented to the membership on April 17, the first day of bargaining, vaguely calls for "substantial wage increases" while avoiding any mention of COLA or sick leave. Like their counterparts in the city unions, the TWU bureaucracy is maneuvering to cut a deal acceptable to the Democratic Party apparatus, which controls

the MTA. The 3 percent wage increases in the just-passed contract for 100,000 workers in DC 37, the largest municipal union in New York City, is a warning.

In the runup to the contract expiration, TWU President Davis is working with Democratic state legislators to modify the anti-strike Taylor Law. After transit workers defied the law and launched a powerful strike in 2005, then TWU President Roger Toussaint was jailed for 10 days and the TWU was hit with a \$2.5 million fine. The union then agreed to have the cost of the fine deducted from its own members' paychecks.

According to the legislation, the Taylor Law would not be abolished but "modified" to remove economic penalties that the unions would incur from a strike. At the same time, the legislation is modeled after the Railway Labor Act, which all but prohibits strikes by tying workers up in endless "cooling off" periods, federal mediation, presidential advisory boards and Congressional intervention, as workers at Metro-North and New Jersey Transit are currently experiencing. The RLA was used by the Biden administration, Congress and the railroad unions to outlaw a strike by 120,000 railroad workers last year and impose a concessionary contract that workers initially rejected.

The transit workers' contract fight in New York City is not happening in isolation. A movement in the working class is emerging. In New York City, this includes film and TV writers preparing to strike Tuesday and hundreds of thousands of teachers, nurses and other municipal workers who remain without a contract. In coming months, hundreds of thousands of UPS, US Postal Service and Big Three autoworkers also face major contract battles.

Internationally, transit workers have been at the fore of a growing strike movement, which involved transportation workers striking in Greece and France on Monday alone. The unacceptable demands of the MTA and their accomplices in the union bureaucracy can be countered by the initiative of workers themselves, orienting not to the representatives of Wall Street in the Democratic Party but to the aspirations of the working class who face the same fundamental issues.

Are you a transit worker? Fill out the form below for more information about forming a rank-and-file committee for the upcoming contract battle.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact