

TWU keeps New York City transit workers on the job as contract expires

Daniel de Vries
17 May 2023

The contract between New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 expired Monday, leaving approximately 37,000 subway and bus workers in limbo.

While negotiations have been ongoing for more than a month, the passing of the contract deadline demonstrates that both the union apparatus and the transit agency are content to drag out the process while they prepare a concessionary deal for workers. The TWU bureaucracy's only response was a perfunctory statement that underscored they intend to carry out the dictates of the Democratic Party for labor peace and concessions. "The terms will remain in effect until a new deal is reached and ratified," the statement read. "We are working hard to secure the fairest deal possible."

What is possible is determined through struggle, but the TWU is actively suppressing a real fight. The negotiations are unfolding behind the backs of workers, to the extent that several workers told WSWS reporting teams at bus depots and subway stations last week that they were unaware the contract was expiring. In a departure from past contract struggles, the TWU has neither called a mass membership meeting nor a mass rally.

The MTA, for its part, is out for blood. The agency, which New York Governor Kathy Hochul controls, has demanded major concessions from workers, including increased health care premiums, gutting overtime and night/weekend differentials, expanding one-person train operations, and reducing sick leave and vacation time. The MTA did not include wage proposals in its recent negotiating position. However, the 3 percent annual raises for nearly 90,000 municipal employees agreed to by District Council 37 of the American Federation of

State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) indicates what is being prepared for transit workers.

While the TWU officials long ago abandoned the principle of "no contract, no work," dragging out negotiations months if not years past the expiration date, the needs of transit workers for significant improvements to working conditions and pay are increasingly urgent. The contract struggle occurs amid a context of a deepening social, political, and economic breakdown in New York City and beyond, which transit workers experience on many fronts. It is also unfolding amid a broader upsurge of the working class, including a strike of 11,000 film and TV writers in New York and Los Angeles, a strike of 500 autoworkers in Ohio, and a wave of transit worker struggles internationally.

An indication of New York City transit workers' determination to fight was expressed last week in a sickout of bus workers at the Flatbush Depot in Brooklyn. Approximately 175 bus workers took part in the job action Monday through Wednesday. According to a source at the depot, the sickout was triggered by management's violation of basic safety practices at the facility. Beyond the conditions at the specific bus depot, however, is widespread anger over deteriorating living and working conditions and the extreme levels of social inequality pushing workers into conflict.

Inflation has more than wiped out the measly wage increases in the last transit contract, which ranged from 2 to 2.75 percent. Compared to two years ago, the combination of a soaring cost of living and anemic wage growth has left transit workers more than 8 percent poorer. A recent report pegged the income needed to meet basic needs for a family of two in New York City at between \$82,000 and \$119,000. Transit workers, like workers in other sectors of the economy,

increasingly struggle to afford rent, food, medical bills, and child care. Indeed, many are forced to work as much overtime as possible and move long distances from their jobs to scrape by.

The three years of the pandemic have exposed the rotten foundations underlying the class relations of American capitalism. More than 170 MTA workers died as a direct result of the criminal response by the ruling class to the outbreak of COVID-19, which was characterized by prioritizing profits above the lives of the working class. As transit workers were forced to remain on the job without protective equipment, the Democrats and Republicans in Washington arranged for the multi-trillion bailout of the financial system and prepared the CARES Act to rescue big business. The pandemic has been allowed to spread unabated, and now the city, state, and federal government have abandoned even the most basic mitigation measures. They have normalized mass illness and death.

This devaluing of human life, accompanied by massive social dislocation, the affordability crisis, and rising social tensions, shows up in various ways in the transit system. The subway and bus system is the last refuge for the homeless as a growing number are squeezed by the lack of affordable housing. Transit workers confront the impact of the abandonment of services for the mentally ill. They have witnessed an increase in suicides and reckless behavior: Since 2018, there has been a 25 percent increase in the number of people struck by trains. While major crimes have declined over the past year, transit workers confront all sorts of anti-social behavior and the threat of violence.

The response by New York City Mayor Eric Adams, New York Governor Kathy Hochul, and the TWU bureaucracy has been to treat the social crisis as a law-and-order issue, deploying police to occupy the subways, sweep the homeless, and arrest fare-beaters. The noxious atmosphere whipped up by this campaign contributed to the chokehold murder of Jordan Neely, a homeless 30-year-old at the hands of a Marine Corps veteran on a subway train earlier this month.

The deployment of police and the glorification of vigilante violence not only ignore the underlying causes of the social crisis but also build up forces to maintain the status quo in the face of emerging workers' struggles.

But realizing the basic needs of transit workers in the

contract struggle depends upon challenging this status quo. New York City is the center of the global financial industry, by some measures the wealthiest city in the world. The rich hoard a grotesque amount of wealth. At the same time, critical services like public transit are in a state of perpetual budget crisis. Workers in the MTA, municipal government, and across the private sector are put under relentless pressure to work more for less while private profits continue to soar. It is this state of affairs, a product of a decaying profit system, that is a barrier to transit workers' basic needs of wages commensurate with the cost of living, of affording health care when ill, of taking time off to spend with family.

The TWU bureaucracy is completely integrated into the Democratic Party apparatus and subservient to the needs of Governor Hochul, Mayor Adams, and President Biden. They ultimately function on behalf of their paymasters on Wall Street, including the major bondholders of MTA debt like BlackRock, which essentially exerts veto authority on the spending of the transit agency.

To advance their class interests and provide an outlet for a real struggle, transit workers must develop the organizational forms they control and direct, that are not beholden to the Democratic or Republican Parties or their servants in the trade union apparatus. We urge transit workers to contact us to get involved in joining the global network of rank-and-file committees.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact