

New York City transit workers union announces sellout contract

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Are you a NYC transit worker? Tell us what you think about the tentative agreement. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Late Tuesday, the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 in New York City announced a tentative agreement for approximately 38,000 subway and bus workers. The bottom line for the proposed three-year deal: Transit workers will be significantly worse off if they accept this sellout contract.

According to the TWU's "highlights," the deal features wage increases of just 3.0 percent in the first two years and 3.5 percent in the final year. These insulting increases fall well below inflation, meaning workers who have already been squeezed by the soaring cost of housing, food, and transportation are now asked to accept a further lowering of their standard of living.

The contract is a disgrace for a workforce that suffered immense losses from COVID-19, including the deaths of more than 170 Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) workers while maintaining transit service throughout the pandemic. Workers must organize themselves independently in rank-and-file committees to ensure the defeat of this proposal by the widest possible margin. Once the contract has been sent to the garbage can where it belongs, workers must take control of talks to ensure that the union will not merely bring back the same deal with minor changes.

The contract proposal also reveals the hollow character of claims by politicians like Democratic New York Governor Kathy Hochul and her predecessor, Andrew Cuomo, to honor the sacrifice endured by transit workers. And it exposes a union bureaucracy that is carrying out the demands of Wall Street to rein in costs at the public agency against the interests of the

workers it supposedly represents.

The "highlights" document presents a series of "major economic and quality-of life gains (sic)" that are, in fact, nothing of the sort. While claiming the wage increases are "substantially better than the city pattern," they are even worse than those for New York City municipal workers in DC 37 (SEIU), who will get a quarter of a percentage more in the overlapping years. But the comparison to other sellout agreements is a mechanism to lower expectations and to convince workers to accept the otherwise unacceptable.

There is an immense gap between what all of the public sector unions are negotiating and what workers actually need. As it stands, many transit workers, teachers, nurses, and other municipal workers cannot afford to live in the city they serve. The astronomical cost of living in New York means that fully half of its residents struggle to afford necessities. Workers need raises that not only keep up with inflation but actually improve their economic situation.

Other economic terms of the agreement remain unclear. The union claims to have beaten back MTA proposals to restructure overtime pay to begin after 40 hours in a week, rather than eight hours in a day. It does not address other proposals that would reduce the money in workers' paychecks, including eliminating some differentials for working night and weekend hours.

The "highlights" are equally vague on health care. The union claims it maintains the status quo on payroll deductions, but is silent on other concessions demanded by the MTA, including increased co-pays, restrictions on coverage for non-generic prescription drugs and the elimination of a high-coverage health insurance option. Under conditions of an ongoing pandemic, with the long-term impact of COVID on the heart, lungs, and

brain only beginning to emerge, workers need substantial lowering of healthcare costs and greater access to care.

The TWU bureaucracy is also trumpeting the expansion of paid leave for maternity (to 12 weeks) and paternity (to four weeks), up from the current two weeks of coverage. However, the 12 weeks of leave for mothers merely brings the MTA in line with what New York state currently requires of private sector employers. The MTA deal shortchanges new fathers of eight weeks of leave compared to the state requirements.

The TWU's "highlights" are also silent on major elements of the MTA's push for increased worker availability. Decreasing workers' sick days and vacation days has been a priority of the transit agency, which collaborated with the TWU in the last contract to provide financial incentives for the union to increase attendance. While the pandemic upended that effort, the MTA revived a series of availability demands in negotiations last month. These include group incentives (or collective punishment) based on attendance and expanding disciplinary action against workers needing more sick leave.

The drive by the MTA, with the support of the TWU, to reduce sick leave is perverse in light of the pandemic. Forcing transit workers, who interact with colleagues and the riding public, to report to work while sick will spread disease. It is a danger to public health. Transit workers need unlimited sick leave and must be allowed to fully recover from contagious diseases like COVID-19 without any loss of pay.

In an attempt to sweeten the deal, the MTA and TWU negotiated cash bonuses of \$3,000 this year and \$1,000 next year, a large chunk of which will be eaten up in taxes. Signing bonuses are a common ploy to avoid raising base pay so workers lose out on wage increases. The two payouts are fraudulently characterized as "hazard pay," as if the hazards that transit workers face have subsided. But not only is the pandemic far from over, workers face continual health and safety risks from other sources, including high levels of toxic rail dust that the MTA has done nothing about.

The full details of the MOU must be immediately released so that workers know what is in the deal and have adequate time to discuss it. However, it is clear from the "highlights" that the TWU bureaucracy is

attempting to ram through an unacceptable deal riddled with concessions.

This attack on transit workers represents an attempt to make the working class pay for the crisis at the MTA. While the MTA received a token bailout from the state this year, it is grappling with a growing debt now pegged at approximately \$48 billion. This long-term debt is the product of decades of gross underfunding. Rather than redirecting the tremendous wealth controlled by the wealthy in New York City to fund transit and other social services, officials held the system together by issuing bond debt.

Now, as giant multinationals like BlackRock reap tax-free returns on massive bond holdings, the MTA is sinking deeper into debt and allocating a rising share of its operating expenses to paying off debt. Debt service is expected to rise to 17.9 percent this year and 19.5 percent in 2024, according to the financial report delivered at the MTA's board meeting last month.

The drive to make workers pay for the MTA's crisis is mirrored in the austerity programs in New York City and around the country. While Wall Street amassed record profits during the pandemic, Mayor Eric Adams is attempting to push through a budget with across-the-board cuts to city services and is working with the municipal unions to craft sellout agreements similar to the TWU deal. At a national level, the federal cuts are forthcoming following the stage-managed negotiations over the debt ceiling. Meanwhile, the Biden administration can find unlimited funds for carrying out its war aims against Russia in Ukraine.

The contract for transit workers has implications well beyond the city and state. Transit workers occupy a critical position in the economy of New York City, the center of global finance, and have connections to workers around the world. A battle here against the attempts to force through a concessions deal can provide the impetus for a broader offensive of the working class. We urge transit workers to organize rank-and-file committees to defeat the contract and expand the fight.



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