

Why New York transit workers must reject the negotiated contract and build independent rank-and-file committees

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Are you a New York City transit worker? To get more information about building rank-and-file committees to defeat the sellout contract and fight for what transit workers need, fill out the form at the end of this article.

New York City bus and subway workers are angered over the tentative agreement between the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) that would provide 38,000 workers with minuscule wage hikes in one of the most expensive metropolitan areas in the world. At just 9.8 percent compounded over three years, the proposed raises are well below the official rate of inflation—currently around 5 percent nationally—and will do nothing to compensate for years of declining real wages.

Three years of brutal experiences with the pandemic have left a lasting impression on New York City transit workers, among the hardest hit of any section of workers in the US. After all the sacrifices, which included the deaths of at least 110 TWU members and more than 60 others at the MTA, the attempt by the union bureaucracy to push through a de facto wage cut has been met with outrage.

Writing in to the WSWs, one transit worker commented, “I nearly lost my life battling COVID twice. The MTA never gave me back my sick days that I used. We work in hazardous conditions on a daily basis. My rent goes up 50 dollars every year, but my salary doesn’t. This is the thanks that the MTA gives us for coming into work. When COVID first came, the MTA didn’t take it seriously and warned us (the workers) to avoid wearing a face mask. Apparently, they didn’t want to tarnish their image. They bring the morale down, and our union is a joke.”

Another New York City transit worker explained, “I’ve been working for transit specifically on the tracks for six years, and the working conditions are very dangerous and not health friendly. I have been experiencing respiratory problems three years after working here. I’m so afraid of hearing that I could have cancer every time I go get physicals because of the mess we breathe in down here. All we ask for is a fair wage to keep up with inflation and some hazard pay.”

Another worker remarked, “The fact that the union signed for 3 percent wage increase in the face of monumental increases in cost of living is a slap to the face of every worker. In addition, that the union joined management to force workers to come in 5 additional

days suggests there is something awry with leadership.”

The latter comment refers to a hidden provision in the deal that effectively transforms the union apparatus into a division of management to brutally increase the productivity of transit workers.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), under the heading “Availability/Gainshare,” states: “For the term of this Agreement, the parties commit to achieving an average employee availability improvement of five (5) days. Current availability is 196 days. Once the availability reaches 201 days, the parties will implement gainsharing of any additional improvement (agreed to by the parties as a 50%/50% basis), which may include an enhanced Sick Leave Cash Out for those whose good attendance is to be rewarded. Within sixty (60) days of full and final ratification of this Agreement, the parties will convene to discuss gainsharing options that can be implemented once the employee goal is reached.”

In other words, the union bureaucracy may be financially rewarded for increasing employee “availability,” productivity and reducing overtime. The language in the current deal reinstates similar attempts in the last contract to decrease time off by transit workers that were largely upended by the pandemic. Indeed, the MTA has complained that employee availability declined 20 days in the year 2021, but only lately has there been a mere two-day improvement resulting in a total loss of 18 days.

The language of the terms means that once the union has achieved management’s immediate goal of the stated five days’ improvement, it will then have a meeting with management to discuss “gainsharing” by the parties on a 50-50 basis; that is, to potentially reward the union apparatus for forcing workers to show up, whether they are exhausted, sick or face a family emergency, and pumping more productivity out of them. According to this language, the union would get half of whatever gains the authority obtains. Employees who have “good attendance” may be rewarded—or not.

This agreement is an integral part of Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul’s recently passed New York state budget for the MTA, which involves a commitment by the transit agency to save \$400 million, including measures to improve employee availability and productivity. The TWU bureaucracy has fully integrated itself into the Democratic Party establishment, including “enthusiastically” campaigning for Hochul.

The big question is how will the union and the management achieve this, and what punitive measures will be taken against workers who have Long COVID or other chronic diseases. It is not an accident that none of this appears in the union's so-called "highlights" promoted on its website. As far as the union bureaucrats are concerned, the less the members know about this, the better. In order to suppress discussion of it, they have buried it in legalese language and decided that the MOU will only be mailed out when the ballots are mailed out for voting and not before.

The collusion of the TWU bureaucracy with the MTA and Hochul administration underscores the need for transit workers to build rank-and-file committees to transfer power from the union apparatus to the workers who operate and maintain the transit system. This committee should expose the sellout character of the contract, widely campaign for its defeat and unite with other sections of workers in the city to win the demands that transit workers and their families need, not what the corporate-controlled politicians claim is affordable.

In opposition to this proposed sellout, transit workers need a substantial raise to recoup decades of losses, plus a cost-of-living allowance pegged to inflation. Workers need an unlimited right to sick leave for anyone diagnosed with Long COVID, a highly debilitating disease as well as all other chronic illnesses. The past health care concessions, including the 2 percent paycheck deductions, emergency room co-pays to \$100, and rise in co-pays for pharmaceuticals, must be overturned. Workers should also demand the abolition of the oppressive and degrading "sick desk," which ill workers must notify when they leave to return home. In many cases, inspectors are then dispatched to verify their whereabouts.

Especially under the conditions of the pandemic, which is by no means over, health care must be a democratic right for all working people.

The attack on transit workers is taking place under conditions where the agency is proposing 4 percent fare hikes and 6-7 percent toll hikes for drivers who use the various tunnels and bridges under its control. These toll and fare increases, after the required public hearings, are scheduled to take effect later this year. Together, these efforts represent an attempt to make transit workers, riders and drivers pay for the agency's fiscal crisis.

The MTA has a long-term bond debt of about \$48 billion and growing. According to the most recent report issued by the Office of the State Comptroller (OSC), "debt service paid out of the operating budget would peak at \$6.5 billion in 2047." To deal with this, the MTA is relying heavily on the planned creation of congestion pricing, which is, in essence, a regressive tax for all those who drive into Lower Manhattan. According to the OSC, without it, debt service as a percentage of total revenue will rise to 21.2 percent by 2031. With congestion pricing, the debt service would become 16 percent from 2023 through 2026.

Further, the OSC makes the point that the MTA optimistically assumes that there will be economic growth. If not realized, the MTA's forecasts would worsen and call into question the agency's use of backloading of debt payments, in which they only pay interest upfront while deferring the payment of principal into

the future.

These demands that workers pay for the crisis in New York transit are taking place while a bipartisan agreement was just made, using the federal debt limit as a rationale to impose austerity measures on working people all over the country. At the same time as sacrifices are demanded of workers, the representatives of the ruling class are handing over even more money to the very rich, the banks, Wall Street and the military for its wars.

There is, objectively, more than enough money to pay for good living standards as well as to provide a safe and reliable mass transit system. Just in New York state alone, the net worth of the ultra-richest increased by \$228 billion in the first two years of the pandemic.

The problem is that the entire system worldwide exists in the interests of rich individuals and powerful corporations. The union bureaucracies' collaboration with the corporate and political establishment provides essential support. Opposition is emerging, however, including major upheavals, such as in Sri Lanka against austerity measures imposed by the government and in France against pension cuts.

In Greece, there were major protests against a decrepit mass transit system that made it possible for two trains to crash into each other, killing dozens of passengers and crew members. In India, popular outrage is building over the deaths of hundreds from a rail accident caused by decades of official neglect.

New York transit workers must form rank-and-file committees to mobilize opposition to the sellout contract. These committees must be independent of the union apparatus and their pro-capitalist Democratic and Republican masters. This means reaching out for the broadest unity among transit riders and vehicle drivers as part of the growing development of workers' struggles that are taking place all over the world against this degenerate for-profit corporate system.

To get more information about joining and building rank-and-file committees, fill out the form below.



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