

“Our pay is being cut, and the union wants to force us to work another five days for nothing”

New York transit workers speak out as TWU pushes sellout deal

Our reporters
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Transit workers in New York City denounced the tentative agreement being pushed by Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 in interviews and written submissions to the *World Socialist Web Site* last week. The deal represents an attack on workers’ living standards, providing wage increases of between 3.0 and 3.5 percent per year at a time when inflation stands at 5 percent. The median rent for apartments in New York City alone rose by more than 8 percent compared to last year.

The agreement also seeks to solidify the TWU bureaucracy’s integration into management. It contains a provision to award the union for forcing workers put in at least five more days each year with no additional pay.

The deal is vague on how exactly that would be achieved. However, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) has long implemented draconian policies that make sick leave difficult to use, including sending inspectors to verify workers are at home when on leave. Well before the tentative agreement was inked, the MTA, in collaboration with the TWU, rolled back all pandemic-related leave policies, despite the ongoing risks.

The MTA’s push to extract more from workers regardless of health and safety considerations was evident during last week’s air quality emergency in New York City. On Wednesday, outdoor air monitors in the city recorded record-shattering levels of air pollution, topping off at an Air Quality Index of 429 out of 500, far above the hazardous threshold of 300. Official health guidance counseled everyone, even healthy adults, to remain indoors.

As with the pandemic, transit workers were forced to remain on the job without any meaningful effort to protect their health. Speaking to the WSWs, one transit worker

described how workers were left to fend for themselves. “The union did absolutely nothing. No bulletins. No memorandums, no safety checks, no nothing. Didn’t even come onto the properties to hand out masks.”

In fact, as bad as the air quality was outside, samples taken by scientists on subway platforms showed readings even higher. As *Gothamist* reported, a team of researchers measured the concentration of fine particles at Christopher Street station Wednesday at 660 micrograms per cubic meter. Translating these concentrations to an Air Quality Index is impossible, as it is literally off the charts.

But it is not just during wildfire emergencies that transit workers face deadly levels of pollution. A study published in 2021 showed staggering levels of toxic particles in subway tunnels and on platforms. The readings in New York City were the highest ever recorded for a subway system, with one-hour measurements of fine particulate matter at one station reaching 1,700 micrograms per cubic meter—nearly seven times what would be considered hazardous for outdoor air.

To the MTA and the TWU bureaucracy, workers’ lives are expendable. The more than 170 COVID-19 deaths MTA-wide were not simply due to a natural disaster but were the outcome of longstanding policies and practices that prioritize the needs of big business over the interests of the working class. The current sellout deal is an attempt to continue this brutal policy.

In an interview with WSWs reporters, an MTA transit cleaner with a year on the job denounced the TWU contract. “I think that is horrible,” she said. “Our pay is being cut, and the union wants to force us to work another five days for nothing. We have to do something to change this. We are not slaves.”

Her co-worker added, “I think it should be rejected. The union should be helping us, not helping themselves. They are money hungry. A conductor was talking about the bonus. It doesn’t go into our pay, and what percentage of it is going to be taxed? Then they say the chairs and seats don’t need to be sanitized now, and take away our overtime.”

The first cleaner continued, “Overtime is good for sanitizing the chairs and seats. We could go up to 205th Street where we worked before and do the sanitizing work in the yards. They cut our overtime to sanitize the chairs in October or November. It was partly because they say the pandemic is over, which it is not, and partly because some contract with private vendors ran out.”

Many transit workers rely on overtime to pay the exorbitant costs of housing and other necessities in New York City. For many, it is a choice between working extreme hours just to make ends meet or going without but being able to spend more time with family.

A veteran train operator on the 7-Line stated, “I think the union sells us out generally. I just read the plusses in the highlights sheet that the union sent out. I don’t think the bonuses mean anything. They don’t have things that workers could really use like EZ-Pass so we don’t have to pay those huge tolls at the bridges and tunnels. Nothing has changed to improve working conditions for the 12 years I have been here.”

The WSWs reporting team discussed the call for building rank-and-file committees to take control out of the hands of the union bureaucracy and into the hands of workers themselves. “It would make a lot of sense,” he replied. “Every slate that runs for union office, they promise you everything, but things keep getting worse. It is like the politicians. They promise everything as well, and things keep getting worse. I feel we have to have something that deals with the whole situation.”

Another train operator with seven years of service related, “The MTA wanted to squeeze more work out of us and force workers to work for 10 years before getting a four-week vacation. They dropped that. They paid more on health care and benefits than they wanted, but that makes sense because we are federal and state employees. Many transit workers compare us to MetroNorth, where they make about \$10 an hour more than we do. I understand that they are a railroad. For us to match them, we need good lawyers. The MTA puts tricks in the details. Due to [former Governor Andrew] Cuomo, our salaries have been cut. These cuts were how he raised his campaign funds.”

A bus driver based out of East New York said, “A 9.8 percent raise over three years? No, not at all. I’m not voting for that. I don’t agree at all with what they’re doing to retirees’ health care. I come from a family of transit workers. My dad just retired, and they’re going after his health care.”

“Now they’re trying to get the union a bonus for making us come in,” he added. “You’re our union. You’re supposed to be working for us. They’re only working for themselves.”

Writing into the WSWs, another transit worker commented, “[New York City Transit Authority] continues to undervalue its workers by showing us, during every contract time, by not paying us our worth! We are here for the City of NY during every storm, flood, disaster, blackout, and anything else you can name. We lost the most workers due to COVID than any other agency. We were promised, by the governor and other higher-ups, that we would be taken care of for our impact during that time. Doesn’t look like it to me. We lobbied and got votes for the new governor, only for her to turn her back on us. We demand a cost-of-living increase to our new contract!”

Another described the situation in the elevator/escalator department as “underpaid, hazardous conditions, and much more.” A colleague reported that MTA elevator mechanics earn \$23 less per hour than the prevailing wage in the state and city.

A station agent wrote, “This is an unfair contract. We deserve a better raise. Minimum should be 6 percent per year and hazard pay for COVID-19 pandemic. A lot of agents passed away due to COVID-19, and we deserve a better contract. I will vote NO for this contract.”

The WSWs urges all transit workers to oppose this sellout contract and to begin organizing themselves into rank-and-file committees. As a first step, these committees should campaign for a “No” vote and seek to unite with workers in other industries, including among teachers and other municipal workers currently without a contract and with UPS workers preparing for a contract battle of their own. In all these contracts, the starting point must be what workers need, not what the politicians who represent Wall Street say they can afford.



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