

Train engineers vote almost unanimously to strike New Jersey Transit

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A vote by locomotive train engineers to authorize a walkout against New Jersey Transit (NJT) was announced by the local chapter of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainman (BLET), an affiliate of the Teamsters union, last Thursday. Out of the 399 ballots that were returned, all voted to strike except for two that were voided. There are 494 members in the local.

A judge had allowed this strike vote to proceed, but also ordered the union to email its members that they were, because of a previous June 2022 court order, prohibited from engaging in any kind of job action.

The 2022 ruling was a result of what the transit agency called an “illegal job action” when on June 17, that year, the Juneteenth holiday weekend, many engineers called in sick, resulting in hundreds of train cancellations. A judge sided with the transit agency, ordered the engineers back to work and barred them from any future walkouts. New Jersey Transit subsequently sued BLET and the national union has agreed to pay a \$50,000 fine.

The anti-worker federal Railway Labor Act, enacted in 1926, prevents an immediate legal strike action. If it chooses to strike, the union must ask the National Mediation Board (NMB) to “release” the union which then creates a 30-day “cooling off” period. The NMB is the federal agency for obtaining settlements and preventing strikes for both the nation’s railroads and airlines. If there is no settlement in that time, then either the governor, Congress or the president can ask for a “presidential emergency board” to try to get an agreement. The entire process might take up to 270 days before a legal walkout can occur.

This was the process used by Biden and the Democratic-controlled Congress to ban the strike last year by 110,000 railroad workers and impose a pro-company contract, brokered by the White House, that workers had previously rejected.

The New Jersey Transit engineers have been without a

new contract since January 1, 2020. NJT, the third largest regional transit system in the country, has contractual agreements with 14 other unions. These unions agreed to wage increases starting at 2 percent, which gradually rises to 3 percent on the fifth year of the package. This will continue the cut in real wages workers have suffered due to record levels of inflation over the last two years.

BLET officials have stated that its engineers require a higher level of training and responsibility and that the wages their members are paid are below those at other railroads such as Amtrak, the Long Island Railroad, Metro-North, and the New Jersey-New York PATH rapid transit system. The BLET leadership says it is seeking an increase in the hourly starting salary from the current \$39 to \$50.

While the transit agency is anticipating an annual shortfall of around \$1 billion by 2026, management is wasting \$440 million on relocating to a new headquarters, according to union officials.

BLET President Eddie Hall has issued a statement condemning “NJT’s mismanagement, stonewalling and short-sighted decisions as well as inaction by state elected leaders.” Yet he has no strategy or intention of leading any fight against the austerity budgets overseen by the Democratic Party, let alone the anti-strike Railway Labor Act.

The BLET has made a pathetic appeal to billionaire Democratic Governor Phil Murphy pointing to his promise to “save NJT” by hiring more engineers, which the union contends can only be done by increasing the engineers’ salaries comparably to other railroads.

This strategy completely ignores the fact that Murphy has already made his position clear when he appeared on television on June 20, 2022 and said he was “pissed” about the job action.

He said, “This is completely and utterly unacceptable. It wasn’t a cold, snowy Tuesday in January. These guys did

this knowing it was a Friday in the summer holiday weekend, trashing people's either work commutes or holiday plans—completely despicable.”

BLET, which also bargains for locomotive engineers who work for the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), the railroad based in Philadelphia, complains that its members are underpaid although it has overseen the cut in real income of its own members by agreeing to one sellout agreement after another.

SEPTA also faces a shortage of workers, largely due to the impact of the pandemic and exhausting work schedules. According to official figures, there are 174 engineers at SEPTA, about 40 fewer than the agency has budgeted for, although there are 26 in various stages of training. While the union has not threatened a strike, negotiations with SEPTA are also stalled.

Another railroad contractual dispute is taking place with 600 car inspectors, coach cleaners, and mechanics who work for the MetroNorth commuter railroad, part of the New York-based Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), and who have been working without a contract since August 2019.

The president of the national Transport Workers Union (TWU), John Samuelsen, is complaining that these workers are not getting the same economic package that the New York City subway and bus workers got, and that the MTA is trying to obtain language in the contract that would allow the agency to unilaterally reopen it.

Samuelsen avoided mentioning the fact that the TWU imposed a concessionary contract on 37,000 New York City transit workers, which provided wages below the rate of inflation, cutbacks to Medicare health benefits for retirees, and contains a clause that financially rewards the union bureaucracy for being a part of management's drive to increase productivity and “employee availability.”

Samuelsen, who sits on the MTA Board, asserted that the transit agency chief, Janno Lieber, believes that in case of a walkout, US President Joe Biden will prohibit a strike on MetroNorth, just as he did last year against the railroad workers.

In December 2022, President Biden and Congress by agreement of both pro-corporate parties rapidly passed legislation that both prevented a strike and imposed by law a package on the railroad workers that had been rejected by the membership.

This was made possible by the role of the railroad unions who after three years of fruitless negotiations and

failing to impose a sellout by various threats including a Congressional injunction, deliberately did not call a strike when legally allowed, to give Congress enough time to carry out its dirty work in the interests of the rail companies.

Samuelsen claims that 2024 is different because it is an election year and Biden needs labor's vote. This is an example of how the union heads try to keep the membership attached to and give their support to the two parties, especially the Democrats, no matter what legal and punitive actions they take against workers.

Furthermore, the MTA has stated that there is a legal “cooling-off” period that lasts for 90 days. While the union states that it wants to be released immediately, the MTA maintains that the three-member board is appointed by the president and therefore will prevent a strike during the 2024 election year.

Some TWU officials have promoted the idea that it would be better if New York's anti-strike Taylor law were replaced by the federal railroad legislation although it is no less onerous.

It is necessary to unite transit workers in New Jersey and the Philadelphia and New York metropolitan areas in one struggle for decent wages and working conditions for all. The tri-state area is home to 158 billionaires, with the former mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg, hoarding \$95.4 billion alone. The wealth is there to meet the needs of working people and must be utilized for healthcare, housing, and safe, efficient public transportation.

Rank-and-file committees, which organize workers independently of the union bureaucracies and the Democratic and Republican parties, must be created to unite all these struggles.



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