

Federal mediators intervene against potential New Jersey Transit strike

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The National Mediation Board summoned NJ Transit and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLET) to Washington DC Monday in order to prevent a strike which could begin this Friday, May 16. The last engineers strike in New Jersey, which lasted for 34 days, took place in 1983. In 2016, a strike was narrowly averted by an eleventh-hour agreement.

NJ Transit runs more than 900,000 bus and train trips every week, and is the third largest passenger railroad in the country, behind the Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North in the New York area.

The President and CEO of NJ Transit, Kris Kolluri, said Saturday that he welcomed the National Mediation Board's intervention, following a well-worn strategy in the rail industry to suppress strikes and force through unacceptable contracts.

The agency heads and the union leadership had come to a tentative agreement in March for 450 train engineers, but on April 15 the rank-and-file voted it down by an 87 percent margin. According to the union, 93 percent of workers who were eligible cast their ballots, a sign that workers are united to win their demands.

That set off a 30-day cooling-off period that ends on May 15. However, under the undemocratic and anti-worker Railway Labor Act, Congress can vote to impose a deal to end the legal walkout. This process was used in 2022 to prevent a nationwide strike of Class I freight railroad workers. The anti-strike bill passed with support from both Republicans and Democrats, including key support from supposedly "progressive" and even "socialist" Democrats like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders.

However, the decisive role in blocking a strike was played by the rail unions, including the BLET. An initial contract brokered by the White House was resoundingly defeated earlier in the fall, clearing the way for a national strike in the leadup to the midterm elections. Instead, the bureaucracy stalled for time, imposing endless unexplained delays and threatening workers for wanting to take action.

Railroaders across the country organized to fight this

government-carrier-union conspiracy by founding the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee as "a means of communication for working out strategy and joint actions outside of the control or the prying eyes of scab union bureaucrats and corporate stoolpigeons, and of appealing for the widest possible support from workers across the country and around the world." The Committee organized meetings attended by hundreds of railroaders and held informational pickets around the country.

As was the case three years ago—and is taking place today in a new round of national rail contracts—the union bureaucrats in New Jersey have consciously isolated the engineers. In the original contract offer retroactive to January 1, 2020, instead of standing together, 15 of the NJ Transit unions accepted the settlement that the BLET rejected.

This practice of isolating workers continued last week, with NJ Transit and the Amalgamated Transit Union announcing a tentative settlement for 5,500 NJ Transit employees on the eve of a potential strike of locomotive engineers.

Eroding wages, cuts to transit funding

New Jersey Transit engineers have been working under an expired contract since December 31, 2019. They voted to approve a walkout in August 2023, but federal railroad law legally prevented a strike for an extended period of time.

The main issue in dispute is wages. The workers want just under a 5 percent raise per year. NJ Transit says it cannot afford even these exceedingly modest demands. The union points out that the agency wasted \$500 million for a 25-year lease for a new headquarters.

NJ transit has attempted to paint engineers as "entitled," but ignores the fact that workers are forced to regularly take on large amounts of overtime to make ends meet in one of

the most expensive metropolitan areas in the country.

NJ engineers have a current starting wage of \$39.78 an hour, based on the expired contract of five years ago. This compares with \$55.44 per hour for Amtrak, \$49.92 per hour for the Long Island Rail Road, \$57.20 per hour for Metro-North, \$42.17 per hour for SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority), and \$50.01 per hour for the PATH train between New York and New Jersey. Eight locomotive engineers have left NJ Transit for other railroads earlier this year.

If there is a strike, NJ Transit plans to spend \$4 million a day to increase its bus service to break the strike, but that will only help about 20 percent of the 350,000 riders who would be impacted.

NJ Transit has engaged in a propaganda campaign to turn passengers against the workers. It stated that, to meet these demands, the agency would have to increase fares by 17 percent starting July 1, increase the corporate transit fee by 27 percent, or drastically reduce service throughout the system.

The New Jersey Chamber of Commerce, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and Chamber of Commerce Southern New Jersey Business & Industry Association all issued statements condemning the BLET contract demands, claiming that they would hurt the passengers.

As has been done countless times before, these statements are consciously designed to divide transit workers from transit riders in the interest of corporate profits. There is plenty of money for both inflation-busting raises and high quality and affordable service. The New York City area hosts the most dollar billionaires in the world, while in Manhattan, Wall Street speculates with trillions of dollars drawn from the exploitation of workers all over the world.

The problem for both the transit riders and workers is the refusal of the ruling class to provide adequate funding for transit service. As a result, NJ Transit is suffering from an aging fleet and outdated infrastructure. Last summer was particularly difficult, with thousands of train cancellations and horrendous on-time performance, mostly due to signal failures and sagging overhead wires. In addition, rail cars, some of them 40 years old, experience all too frequent breakdowns. Passengers complain of foul-smelling train cars often littered with trash.

This is a problem all over the country. In Illinois, if the state does not make funding available this month, massive cuts in the Chicago transit system will begin in early 2026.

Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro stated in a news conference in April, “We face a dire situation for mass transit agencies all across Pennsylvania, from Pittsburgh to Philly and rural communities in between.”

In San Francisco, thousands of commuters were stranded

during the peak hours Friday morning as a computer failure knocked out service. This shutdown of the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system lasted for more than four hours. This is emblematic of the agency’s financial difficulties. BART increased fares by 5.5 percent in January, with the average fare now at \$4.72, up from \$4.47, but this does not solve the agency’s serious budget deficits.

Bloomberg News recently estimated that the nation’s largest transit systems are facing a \$6 billion shortfall.

The federal government has long kept transit systems throughout the country on rations, forcing delays to necessary infrastructure upgrades and cuts to bus and rail service. Under Trump, this process is accelerating, as the administration seeks to eviscerate what remains of social infrastructure, threatening to withhold even funds that are already appropriated to transit agencies.

For example, in New York, Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy has been threatening to cut badly needed funds that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority needs to maintain and modernize its \$1.5 trillion system through its capital program.

A strike by New Jersey transit workers could serve as the basis for a broad, unified struggle by the working class against inequality and oligarchy, which finds its most grotesque expression in the would-be dictator Donald Trump. As in the national rail contract three years ago, this requires the development of new organs of struggle, rank-and-file committees, which workers control.

It is necessary that transit workers and riders form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and the Democratic and Republican politicians. Both corporate-controlled parties are determined to make working people pay for an economic crisis caused by Wall Street. The only way to guarantee good living standards and safe, well-functioning transportation infrastructure is to fight against the entrenched power of the oligarchy, taking the money and resources hoarded at the top and placing it at the disposal of the working class and society as a whole.



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