

# NYC-area transit workers push for strike action on Long Island Railroad

Alan Whyte  
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*Are you a transit worker in New York or another city? Tell us what you are fighting against by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

Workers on the Long Island Railroad (LIRR), one of two commuter rail lines operated by New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), are preparing for a strike that could come as early as September 18.

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) sent out strike-authorization ballots to almost 600 engineers, due back by September 15. The engineers operate 947 daily trains and carry about 250,000 passengers into and out of New York City and communities in Long Island each weekday. The state-run MTA also oversees subways and buses in New York City and the Metro-North Railroad, the commuter line that services the northern suburbs.

Four other unions are also involved in talks. LIRR workers are divided into 60 craft unions, but the five threatening to strike consist of 55 percent of the workforce.

The last LIRR strike in 1994 lasted for three days. In 2014, workers voted to strike, but the union bureaucrats settled three days before the scheduled walkout.

The MTA is offering a provocative 9.5 percent raise over three years. Since the last contract in 2022, which gave engineers pay raises of only 5.32 percent after inflation, real wages have declined by approximately 3.39 percent. Workers are widely dissatisfied with the MTA's proposal. As one worker on Reddit said, "Considering there was 8% inflation in 2022 alone, a 9.5% raise isn't really juicy."

The strike vote comes amid an ongoing coup attempt by the Trump administration, which is preparing to send National Guard soldiers into major American cities. Trump's aim is to crush resistance in the working class and rip up core democratic rights. Opposition is growing

to impossible living conditions, made worse by tariff wars, as well as savage austerity by both parties. This includes cuts to America's transit systems, including in Philadelphia and Chicago, which are carrying out what administrators describe as "doomsday" cuts.

The MTA has an annual operating budget of \$20 billion, of which more than 60 percent goes to labor costs. In addition, it has a long-term bond debt of more than \$50 billion. The agency is planning on increasing fares and tolls throughout its system by more than 4 percent every year for two years, which it has been doing with a few interruptions for decades.

A strike by transit workers in New York City, the center of American and world finance, would raise the critical issue of the entry of the working class into the fight against dictatorship. Objectively, any fight by railroad workers is at the same time a fight against the capitalist state. Their right to strike is severely infringed upon by the century-old Railway Labor Act, which subjects workers to endless rounds of mandatory negotiations, arbitration and other moves before they are "released" from taking any form of "self-help."

The National Mediation Board released the five unions from mediation on August 18, which has, under the Railway Labor Act, created a 30-day cooling-off period. This means that workers will be free to strike on September 18.

Because the MTA is a state agency, the state's Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul could ask Donald Trump to invoke a Presidential Emergency Board, which would make any strike action illegal until May. (This, by coincidence, is when the Transport Workers Union local 100 contract for about 35,000 NYC bus and subway workers ends.)

Such a strikebreaking request by Hochul would strengthen Trump's coup. But such a move also has a precedent under the Biden administration in late 2022,

when the White House obtained an anti-strike law against 100,000 Class I railroad workers who had rejected a government-backed deal. Democrats, including Democratic Socialists of America member and Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, joined hands with Republicans after the unions had stalled for months to give them the time they needed.

The rail union bureaucracy wants to avoid such a conflict between workers and the political establishment at all costs. In May, the BLET shut down a strike by New Jersey Transit workers after only three days. As the WSWs said at the time:

The move by the union apparatus to shut down the strike as quickly as possible was due precisely to the strength of the workers. In paralyzing one of the largest commuter rail networks in the US, engineers demonstrated the power of the working class and its potential to resist the relentless gutting of public transit and essential services.

The MTA has already indicated that it would accede to the wage demands of the engineers and other workers if it includes concessions in other areas.

This resembles the contract for the New Jersey Transit engineers, which included a number of cost-saving concessions for the transit agency such as shifting out-of-network reimbursements to Medicare and phasing out the engineers' health management insurance plan. NJ Transit CEO Kris Kolluri remarked, "We got a deal that is cost neutral on the additional money [in wages]."

The chairman of BLET's LIRR engineers' unit, Gil Lang, has said that the transit authority's offer contains concessions that would amount to a reduction of real wages. But this is no reason for the BLET bureaucrats not to accept it.

If an LIRR strike were declared illegal on September 18, it is unlikely that the BLET would defy such a ruling. In any event, the MTA has a strike contingency plan that includes utilizing buses that would transport commuters from Long Island stops to subway stations in Queens. This would mean compelling bus operators to act as scabs. No union, as of this writing, has issued a statement condemning this possibility.

In addition, according to John McCarthy, head of the MTA's external relations, the authority plans to work with New York City officials to make sure that "drop-offs

could be made at those subway stations."

The four candidates now running for New York mayor have so far not said a word about the strike deadline. This includes Zohran Mamdani, the Democratic Party nominee, who, as a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), claims to be fighting for working people. His silence comes as he has spent the weeks since his primary victory seeking to reassure Wall Street and the Democratic Party establishment that they have nothing to fear from him.

The workers who may walk out are not just fighting for themselves but for workers everywhere. Meanwhile, they face a capitalist class that is determined to prevent any opposition from below. This means their fight requires the mobilization of the power of the working class to defeat the power of the corporate oligarchy.

New forms of organization are necessary to prepare such a struggle, which will never be organized by the pro-corporate union bureaucrats. Workers must form rank-and-file committees, excluding union officials, to enforce their strike decision through independent action and to appeal for support across the city and the country.

Such an organization was formed in 2022 in the railroaders' contract struggle, where it played a major role in rallying opposition to the White House-backed contract. In its founding statement, the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee declared:

... we are more powerful than any Congress. Many times throughout history, workers have gone toe-to-toe with the courts, Congress and even the White House and defeated attempts to impose injunctions. That can happen again. It depends not only on organizing ourselves independently to ensure maximum unity and solidarity, but also that we hold no illusions in the bought-and-paid-for political stooges of Wall Street.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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