

Long Island Rail Road union defied 99 percent of its membership to cancel strike

Our reporters
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Last week, after a delay of 10 days, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) finally posted on its website the vote totals from its members to authorize a strike at the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR). Engineers voted 476 to 5 in favor of a walkout, a margin of 99 percent.

Instead of abiding by the will of the membership and organizing a strike, the labor bureaucrats at the BLET and fellow LIRR unions appealed to President Donald Trump to intervene, which he did through an executive order that prevents a work stoppage for at least four months.

The union's web posting also repeated BLET General Chairman Gil Lang's statement at a press conference that the union coalition had to be "the adults in the room," a telling admission that the union apparatus has no intention of fighting for the interests of workers it supposedly represents. Instead, they are actively functioning on behalf of the political and social forces that are lined up against the working class.

The appeal to Trump by the LIRR unions is particularly striking at a time when the administration is deploying troops against the American people and rampaging against the social gains won over the course of decades, including mass transportation infrastructure that LIRR and other rail workers operate. Using the government shutdown to vastly accelerate this process, Trump announced Wednesday the freezing of \$18 billion in rail and subway projects for the New York City area.

Trump's Office of Management and Budget chief Russell Vought justified the attack by citing the bogeyman of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and calling the cuts a "casualty of radical Democrats' reckless decision to hold the federal government hostage to give illegal immigrants benefits." Behind

these fascistic ravings and dictatorial moves, Trump is well aware of the massive social anger building over inequality and the crisis of affordability, and is preemptively seeking to smash any opposition on behalf of the ruling class.

The attempt to impose below-inflation wage increases is the immediate issue at stake in the LIRR contract struggle. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) is offering a 9.5 percent wage hike for three years, a deal that many of the other LIRR unions pushed through to their membership. The LIRR workers holding out have not had a raise since 2022, at a time when inflation climbed to 9 percent.

Federal law mandates that the president appoint this emergency board if either party in the railroad dispute requests it. This could have been done by New York State Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul, who would not do so herself but constantly demanded Trump do it. Ultimately, the union leaders provided political cover for both by calling for an emergency board themselves.

Shortly after the strike was called off, Governor Hochul told reporters, "We have to get away from the strike language and the White House and others should be using their power to say 'you're not allowed to strike.'" On September 22, she ratcheted up demands that LIRR workers accept concessions to offset even modest wage increases, saying "work rules that have been put in place for a long time need to be reexamined." Her demand for work-rule concessions, which the MTA has backed, has been repeated nonstop in the corporate media.

While providing political cover for both Trump and Hochul, the union apparatus is promoting the false conception that there is no popular support for a strike. However, a struggle by LIRR workers would invariably raise political questions, carrying with it the prospects

for the strike to be part of a broader offensive of workers against social inequality and dictatorship, which is precisely why the union apparatus is determined to prevent it.

WSWS reporters spoke with New York City transit workers, who work for the same employer, the MTA, as LIRR workers, giving a sense of opposition and desire for a struggle.

“Trump is destroying everybody’s rights,” a subway cleaner said. “It’s even affecting my neighborhood with ICE and cop raids all over the place. They’re just grabbing people. MTA workers without permanent work visas are being affected, too. A lot of people are leaving the job because of that, which is sad.”

“Workers need more money, more benefits and everything else we’re now missing,” the cleaner added. “It’s too much. The billionaires have money and they just want more and more money.”

A subway conductor remarked, “Everything that makes America America is not what Trump is doing—he’s going against everything. Like on immigration, America is literally built on immigrants.

“It’s ‘do as I say,’ not ‘do as we say.’ I’m for none of that. He’s not for the people. With the tax cuts—how is it that you have the working class paying more taxes and then the billionaires are getting back [money]? So it shows who you are really for.

“And the whole government hasn’t done anything. With everything he’s changing, my thing is that no one in the government is interjecting. If you’re doing something that’s wrong and clearly everyone knows it’s wrong, why isn’t there any action being done to stop it? It’s sad, but it goes to show these politicians are all about their pockets.”

A train operator commented, “Trump has done a lot of damage. People will wise up to him soon. The Democrats will not stop him. No Democrat is standing up.

“None of the politicians are for us. Republicans go after the unions. And it is the Democrats who cut our pensions in the New York State system. They cut the transit pensions by setting up Tier 6.”

He added, “Why are the Long Island Rail Road workers’ unions trying to get in bed with Trump?”

The WSWS reporter explained the call for workers to form independent organizations they control themselves to mobilize the strength of the entire

working class. “I think what you say about the need for rank-and-file committees sounds good,” he said.

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