

Twenty years later, the former head of the Transport Workers Union local rewrites the history of the New York City 2005 transit strike

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23 December 2025

The City University of New York (CUNY) School of Labor Studies hosted an event earlier this month titled “The 2005 NYC Transit Workers Strike: Reflections on the 20th Anniversary,” featuring Roger Toussaint, who was the local union president at that time, Joshua Freeman, a labor historian, and Kafui Atttoh, an associate professor of labor studies. Rather than drawing out the fundamental lessons for today from this critical experience for the working class, the event was an exercise in covering up the union leadership’s betrayals.

The 2005 transit walkout, involving about 34,000 workers, was one of the largest and most powerful strikes of the decade. The strike began on December 20, 2005, shutting down the city of New York, which is heavily dependent on mass transit, for three days.

The 2005 strike was the third of its kind called by Local 100 of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) in its history. The first was in 1966, a 12-day walkout that began on January 1 and led to a decisive victory for the workers. This strike violated the Condon-Wadlin Act, which called for mass firings of workers—a threat that proved unenforceable because it would have led to an indefinite extension of the shutdown.

The ruling class in New York responded by passing the anti-labor Taylor Law with the tacit support of the union bureaucracy, including Victor Gotbaum of AFSCME’s District Council 37. The law seeks to prevent public sector strikes by imposing monetary fines against workers who are threatened with the loss of two days’ pay for every day of a job action or strike.

This law was used to attack transit workers during the next walkout, an 11-day stoppage in 1980. After the union bureaucracy called off the strike in exchange for a concessions contract—a move opposed only by executive board member Ed Winn, a member of the Workers League

(the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party)—transit workers were forced to pay heavy monetary penalties.

This experience discouraged another strike for 25 years. During that period, there was a massive increase in social inequality alongside a huge rise in public indebtedness, including that of New York’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). The transit agency had accumulated \$20 billion in long-term bond debt by 2005 and determined that workers would have to make a variety of concessionary demands to pay for it.

Multibillionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg (now a Democrat), not satisfied with the anti-strike provisions of the Taylor Law, went to court to seek an injunction that would fine every striker \$25,000 for the first day of the job action and double for each subsequent day.

A major ingredient of the 2005 walkout was the fact that the older workforce was increasingly being replaced by younger workers determined to engage in a struggle against intolerable working conditions, threats, low wages and demands for more sacrifice. This contributed to New Directions’ union election victory, a faction led by Toussaint that promised greater militancy. By the time the contract struggle erupted in 2005, the sentiment for a fight was so strong that union leadership had little choice but to call a strike.

During the meeting at CUNY, Toussaint acknowledged some of the major features of the strike, while completely covering up others.

He mentioned in a matter-of-fact manner that the transit local’s parent union, the TWU International, not only opposed the strike, but called on workers to scab on it. In fact, the International went to court, siding with the city in declaring the walkout illegal. While Toussaint refused to draw any conclusions, this was in fact a betrayal of enormous proportions, with self-serving bureaucrats lining

up against the strikers. It expressed broader processes underway around the country and internationally, in which the union apparatus functions ever more openly to police the working class and suppress or sabotage its struggles.

Toussaint, again in a matter-of-fact manner, stated that after two and a half days, the union's executive board called off the strike based on a tentative agreement with the MTA. He omitted, however, the fact that not only did the membership not have a vote on the tentative deal, but they had no idea what was in it.

Toussaint attempted to excuse a major giveback in the agreement, which forced workers to pay 1.5 percent of their earnings toward their health insurance premiums, falsely claiming that it was not unprecedented.

When the workers had a chance to express their opinion, they voted the deal down by a 7-vote margin of the 22,000 members who cast ballots. Although the margin was small, it nevertheless expressed enormous frustration with the concessions, the role of the union leaders, and the penalties the workers were forced to pay. Toussaint, of course, sought to downplay the significance of this. The dispute finally went to binding arbitration, with arbitrators ultimately imposing the same deal that workers had rejected.

In addition to the Taylor Law fines the MTA was already imposing on individual strikers, a New York state court in April 2006 ordered Toussaint jailed, fined the union \$2.5 million, and indefinitely suspended the automatic deduction of union dues from workers' paychecks.

Despite all this, Toussaint essentially presented the strike as a victory.

The most revealing part of this public meeting, however, was the absence of any discussion on the role of the Democratic Party, which the union bureaucracy presented as an ally of strikers. In reality, the Democrats worked to undermine and defeat the strike on behalf of the business and financial interests they represent.

Politicians, who previously postured as backers of transit workers, made clear over the course of the two-and-a-half-day strike where they stood. The TWU-endorsed Democratic candidate for mayor, Fernando Ferrer, was nowhere to be seen during the strike. Senator Hillary Clinton, who attended one of the union's mass membership meetings, reaffirmed her support for the Taylor Law and declared herself "neutral" during the walkout. Democratic politician Jesse Jackson, who was the keynote speaker at the mass membership meeting that authorized the strike, became silent when it actually occurred.

The silence on the Democratic Party was not an innocent omission. It aligns with Toussaint's entire outlook. During the event, the ex-union leader expressed his opposition to a general strike at the time and downplayed the lack of support

from leaders of other unions. In reality, not a single union head in New York came forward to give even verbal support for the strike. What the union leaders and Democratic Party politicians had in common was a fear of the potential for the transit strike to win widespread support and provide an impulse for a broader struggle. All of them were determined to prevent this.

Now, 20 years later, Toussaint is long since retired and New Directions no longer exists. However, the outlook of the union bureaucracy, including that of the current TWU national president, John Samuelson, previously former Local 100 president and member of New Directions, remains fundamentally the same.

Samuelson embodies the union apparatus' integration into the Democratic Party. He previously hobnobbed at \$25,000-a-plate fundraisers hosted by former governor Andrew Cuomo, while more recently joining incoming New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani's transition team.

Meanwhile, since the transit strike 20 years ago, the level of social inequality and the depth of the affordability crisis have exploded. Transit workers in New York City are entering into a contract struggle in 2026 amid a social powder keg, where the immense social power of labor, revealed in part during the 2005 strike, must come to the fore.

However, what the strike 20 years ago also demonstrates, which Toussaint and his collaborators seek to obscure, is the intransigent opposition of the union bureaucracy, together with capitalist politicians, to the basic demands of workers. To defend wages, jobs and public services, it is necessary for workers to organize independently, to form rank-and-file committees that seek to unite with workers across all industries against the big-business politicians and their lackeys in the union apparatus.



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