

# Amid New York City nurses strike, Long Island Railroad unions again prevent walkout with appeal to Trump

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The leaders of five Long Island Railroad (LIRR) unions have sent a letter formally asking President Donald Trump to again intervene in contract talks with New York State's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), which will prohibit their members from engaging in a job action on January 16. The LIRR is the busiest commuter railroad in the United States, connecting suburbs in Nassau and Suffolk counties with New York City.

This is a repeat of the bureaucrats' action last September, when they blocked a strike by calling on Trump to appoint a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB). This legal maneuver, under the Railway Labor Act whose purpose is to all but ban strikes through endless rounds of mediation, postponing legal strike action for four months.

Trump will, as he did before, appoint mediators to a new PEB to issue non-binding recommendations. The recommendations from the last PEB were rejected by the MTA.

The unions' move to sabotage a rail strike comes at a time when 15,000 nurses in New York City are engaged in a powerful strike against dangerous understaffing, impossible working conditions, and a defense of their own health care benefits. Moreover, support is growing across America for a general strike against impossible social conditions and the lawless Trump administration. In Minneapolis, several unions have been compelled to call a general strike next Friday against the ICE rampage through the city.

A strike by railroaders and nurses would raise the need for a city-wide general strike in the minds of New York workers, which is exactly what the bureaucracy wants to prevent. It is an act of deliberate sabotage that must be rejected by rank-and-file workers, through the development of a rank-and-file committee.

The move has no legitimacy because the action was taken in direct violation of the clear will of the membership. LIRR workers have already expressed their desire for a fight by voting to authorize strike action in September. The

membership of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) voted 476 to 5 to authorize a strike.

Also voting for a strike were the workers in the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers and the Transportation Communications Union. Together these account for about one-half of the 7,000 total LIRR workforce, who are in a total of 60 unions.

The move recalls the national rail contract in 2022, where the rail unions similarly called for a PEB which then produced a pro-company proposal. After this sparked outrage among railroaders, the unions worked with the Biden White House to delay a strike long enough for Congress to sign a law imposing the contract workers already rejected. In opposition to this, railroaders formed the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, holding informational pickets, online meetings and issuing statements to bring workers the truth and coordinate action.

## Trump, New York Democrats united against railroaders

The nearly 600 engineers operate 947 daily trains and carry approximately 250,000 passengers into and out of New York City and communities on Long Island each workday. The state-run agency also oversees the subways and buses in the city, as well as the Metro-North Commuter line that services the northern suburbs.

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

The unions are accusing the MTA and Governor Hochul of "cynically" trying to provoke a strike last year. This statement is absurd, since it is beyond obvious that the MTA

and Hochul do not want a strike, and can rely on the union bureaucracy to try to block one.

In the last PEB, the five above-mentioned unions asked for the same wage settlement of 9.5 percent over three years that the other LIRR and New York City bus and subway unions have agreed to, and a 6.5 percent increase in the fourth year of 6.5 percent, for a total of 16 percent. This meager proposal would not keep pace with inflation or the out of control cost of living in the city.

The PEB did not even give them this. In mid-October, it gave a non-binding recommendation of a total of 14 percent over four years retroactive to 2023, plus a signing bonus of \$3,000.

Nevertheless, it was hailed as a partial victory by the unions. Kevin Sexton, the vice-president of the BLET and a spokesman for the coalition, called it “a step in the right direction.”

However, the MTA immediately rejected it, with external relations chief John McCarthy saying of the recommendations that “we do not accept them.”

The Chairman of the MTA, Janno Lieber, has suggested that he would agree to the higher wages in the fourth year in exchange for concessions on union work rules. Similarly, LIRR president Bob Free has also called for changes in work rules.

New York State Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul also complained about the work rules, maintaining that “they play an important role” in driving up costs, and “need to be restructured.” It was precisely this kind of deal, involving the exchange of union work-rule changes for wages, that ended the three-day New Jersey engineers’ walkout in May of last year.

The unions say they “fully expect” the next round of Trump-appointed mediators to also find “labor’s position both more reasonable than the MTA/LIRR overreach and our wage proposals a fair reflection of the rising cost of living on Long Island.” But the real attitude of Trump towards the working class is on display in Minneapolis, as well as in his visit this past week to Detroit, where he cursed and made vulgar gestures to autoworkers during a plant visit.

There is no legitimate reason to think that the outcome will be any better a second time around. The rampage by Trump against workers’ democratic rights and the united front by the MTA, LIRR and the state government shows that railroad workers can only win their demands through strike action, drawing in support from the working class of the city and the wider metro region.

Workers in New York City are spoiling for a fight against inequality and the corporate oligarchy, as expressed in the election of self-described democratic Socialist Zohran Mamdani in last year’s mayoral election. However,

Mamdani has publicly supported Hochul and has not said a word about the LIRR dispute. He appeared on the picket line of striking nurses, but instead of calling for a broader fight against Wall Street has spent months attempting to reassure corporate interests, and even visiting Trump at the White House.

This shows that only action from below, with initiative taken from the rank-and-file, can force the issue.

The appeal for another intervention by the Trump White House means the workers will not be free to legally strike until May 16 of this year, which happens to be the exact date that the contract for the New York City bus and subway workers expires. There is no doubt that, if no contract has been signed by then, the LIRR union bureaucrats will try to find some other excuse to delay even further.

But things are also coming to a head in the city’s transit system. The Transport Workers Union (TWU) local 100 was rebuffed by Governor Hochul last December, when she vetoed a union-backed bill that would have required a conductor on every train. The union had enthusiastically endorsed her for her first run for governor. The president of the national parent transit workers union, John Samuelson, was a member of Mamdani’s transition team.

The MTA now has more than \$48 billion in long-term bond debt, which has been steadily growing for decades. The agency wants workers and passengers to pay for this debt.

But the working class, once it is unified and breaks through sabotage by pro-corporate union bureaucrats, is more powerful than the corporate political establishment. The critical question is the building of such a movement from below through a network of rank-and-file committees, uniting LIRR workers with subway workers, striking nurses, municipal employees and others through the region.



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