

The political issues in the New York City transit workers' contract struggle

Daniel de Vries
29 April 2026

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Negotiations between the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) are underway on a new labor agreement for more than 40,000 New York City transit workers. The current contract for subway and bus workers expires on May 15. This coincides with a potential walkout of more than 3,500 Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) workers in five unions, who will be legally free to strike against the MTA on May 16.

At the heart of both contract battles is a determination by workers to offset the deepening affordability crisis and reverse decades of union givebacks. Over the last decade, contracts have provided transit workers with paltry wage increases of around 2-3 percent per year while the cost of living has skyrocketed. As of March this year, annual inflation in the New York City metro area stood at 4.0 percent. Housing increases are even worse: Median rents in the city are up 6.6 percent compared to last year. President Trump's criminal war in Iran and tariff schemes threaten to blow inflation rates off the charts.

The cost-of-living crisis has been exacerbated by past concessions, including added healthcare costs and the hated Tier 6 pension scheme in New York, which generally requires transit workers and other public sector employees hired after 2012 to work longer, contribute more of their salary to retirement and often results in lower or delayed pension benefits. In the last contract, retiree benefits were squeezed further by forcing retirees onto privatized Medicare plans. Meanwhile, union-management committees were initiated at the MTA to impose cost savings onto workers' backs while providing a financial incentive for the union apparatus.

At the start of negotiations on April 9, TWU Local 100

presented its 37 demands. The union is asking for a three-year deal with "substantial wage increases in each year of the agreement," but has not publicly specified what it considers "substantial." The MTA, in its financial plan for 2027 and beyond, has budgeted for a provocative 2 percent annual wage increase.

The LIRR unions, which are still negotiating a deal stretching back to 2023, have already agreed to wage increases identical to what TWU 100 pushed through in the last contract (3 percent, 3 percent, and 3.5 percent for 2024, 2025, and 2026 respectively). The unions are asking for 5 percent in 2027, but the MTA is offering just 3 percent.

Jai Patel, the MTA's Chief Financial Officer, said at a finance board meeting on April 27 that allowing 3,700 LIRR workers to set the pattern for the rest of the workforce (i.e., the 40,000 subway and bus workers) would be unprecedented. Patel claimed that granting a 5 percent wage increase this year would hurt the budgets of both the city and the state and threatened that labor cost increases would trigger a doubling of the planned fare increases.

Patel's comments highlight the fraudulent limits imposed on the negotiations that both the MTA and the union apparatus accept without question. The MTA pleads poverty, pointing to the burden of its \$49 billion in long-term debt, its backlog of necessary upgrades and its projected operating budget shortfalls in 2027 and beyond. Any wage increases are to be paid for by fare hikes. On the other hand, the union apparatus argues that the MTA has enough money, with the injection of revenues from congestion pricing and the planned casinos, to spare some additional crumbs for workers.

What the union bureaucrats and the political operatives in the MTA conceal is that there is more than enough to provide every transit worker with immediate double-digit wage increases, cut fares to zero and make investments to

expand service if the vast resources that exist are used for social need rather than to line the pockets of the city's 123 billionaires.

At the national level, there are virtually no limits on public spending for bank bailouts or war. President Trump has proposed a budget next year for the military of a staggering \$1.5 trillion—a one-year expenditure that could fund the MTA capital program 30 times over.

Among workers and young people, there is a growing desire to challenge a system where workers' livelihoods and basic social services are sacrificed for the profit motives of a corporate and financial elite. Zohran Mamdani was elected the mayor of New York City precisely because he appealed to this sentiment. He promised, among other things, fast and free buses, paid for by taxing the rich and corporations.

However, in just four months in office, Mamdani has amassed a record that betrays the aspirations of those who look to him to wrest power from the oligarchy. The demand for free buses has largely been dropped. Taxing the rich has been replaced with a nebulous plan to charge a modest fee on *pieds-à-terre* (secondary residences). Mamdani is now attempting to balance the \$4.5 billion budget deficit largely through cost-cutting, including by delaying pension repayments, adding risk for tens of thousands of transit workers in one of the largest pension systems managed by the city.

Bitterly opposed to the independent struggle of the working class, Mamdani instead has focused the first four months of his administration on propping up hated politicians in both parties. Nationally, Mamdani made two visits to the White House, pledging to work with Trump on affordability even as the fascist president launched a criminal war that has triggered an energy crisis. In New York, Mamdani solidified his alliance with Governor Kathy Hochul, endorsing the Democrat for re-election.

With the MTA controlled by the state, Hochul is playing the most direct role in attacking transit workers. Last December, she vetoed a bill mandating two-person train operations, signaling her intent to use the long-term threat of job cuts for conductors and train operators to force through concessions. Hochul has upbraided LIRR workers for refusing to accept work-rule changes that cut pay and has demanded binding arbitration to impose a deal.

In the New York City nurses' strike earlier this year, the governor signed executive decrees enabling scab nurses to work without a license to weaken the strike. Hochul's MTA is likewise preparing a scabbing operation in the event of an LIRR strike, one that will attempt to

rely on the TWU bureaucracy to force bus drivers to run buses as a substitute.

The TWU enthusiastically endorsed Hochul for governor in 2022, only recently reversing course, calling her a "straight-up enemy of the TWU and a disaster for blue-collar New York," in the words of TWU International President John Samuelsen.

The current tiff with the governor notwithstanding, the TWU has long been integrated into the Democratic Party establishment. Samuelsen notably hobnobbed with former Governor Andrew Cuomo at a \$25,000-a-plate fundraiser. Samuelsen also joined Mamdani's transition team, taking part in the mayor's Committee on Transportation, Climate, & Infrastructure. The fact that Mamdani has embraced the "enemy of the TWU" has not prevented their collaboration.

Meanwhile, the LIRR unions appealed to the Trump administration to intervene by appointing a Presidential Emergency Board, which delayed a potential strike by 8 months.

The struggle of transit and rail workers for livable wages is not just a fight against the MTA, but against all the political representatives of the ruling class and their servants, from Trump, Hochul and Mamdani, to the union bureaucracies. These forces function to uphold a system which demands that workers accept cuts while the wealthy cash in. Nothing can be accomplished without challenging this state of affairs.

There are growing signs of working-class militancy, including strikes such as the nurses' walkout in New York City in January-February and the massive nationwide protests against the Trump administration. To beat back the MTA's concessions and win major gains, transit and rail workers must mobilize the strength of the working class and direct it towards a challenge to the subordination of all to profit. We urge MTA workers to form rank-and-file committees that are democratically run, independent of union officials and the Democratic Party, to take direct control of the struggle and assert what workers need, not what is politically acceptable to the ruling class.



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