

New York transit and LIRR workers: Build rank-and-file committees—prepare a united strike!

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Are you a New York City transit or LIRR worker? Fill out the form at the end of this article for information on building a rank-and-file movement to lead a combined struggle against the MTA.

A major class and political confrontation is looming in New York City as labor agreements covering more than 40,000 subway and bus workers expire May 16, the same day a 60-day cooling off period ends for 3,500 Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) workers across five unions. A combined strike against the state-run Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) would shut down transit for four million daily subway and bus riders and 300,000 LIRR commuters, bringing the “Capital of Capital” largely to a halt.

Transit workers, many drawn from the city’s massive immigrant population, have played a critical role in the history of the class struggle in New York City. Because of this, the Democratic-controlled political establishment has used anti-strike laws and the trade union bureaucracy to prevent transit workers from spearheading a broader working-class movement against Wall Street’s repeated efforts to impose financial crises on workers’ backs.

LIRR workers have voted overwhelmingly to strike—members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen voted 476 to 5 for strike authorization, with the other four unions voting similarly. On two occasions—September 15, 2025, and mid-January 2026—the union leadership nullified those votes by appealing to the Trump White House to appoint a Presidential Emergency Board. Trump obliged; the MTA rejected the PEB’s findings; nothing was settled; and state and city authorities gained eight months to prepare a strikebreaking operation.

Any strike would immediately pit workers against the Democratic Party, including Governor Kathy Hochul and the city’s social-democratic Mayor Zohran Mamdani. Under the Taylor Law, New York public employees can be fined one day’s pay for every day on strike. LIRR workers fall under the federal Railway Labor Act, long used by both parties to suppress strikes.

There would be enormous public support for transit workers if they defied these anti-democratic laws. Millions are struggling in the metro area: median home prices in Brooklyn are hitting nearly \$1 million, average housing costs run \$5,500–\$7,500 a month, and rents for a two-bedroom apartment reach \$3,900–\$5,900. To rally this support, rank-and-file transit workers must take the struggle

out of the hands of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) and LIRR union leaderships and build independent rank-and-file committees.

The MTA’s manufactured crisis

The MTA is demanding workers pay for a fiscal crisis they had no hand in creating. The authority holds approximately \$49 billion in long-term bond debt—consuming 15 to 20 percent of its operating budget in debt service to bondholders—accumulated through decades of deliberate underfunding stretching back to the 1970s fiscal crisis.

In New York State alone, 154 billionaires collectively hold nearly \$1 trillion in wealth. Michael Bloomberg, who deployed police against the last transit strike in 2005, holds a personal fortune of \$109 billion. Across the US, the largest transit systems have accumulated a \$6 billion deficit since pandemic relief money ran out—a pittance compared to the Trump administration’s proposed \$1.5 trillion military budget.

Mamdani was elected on promises to tax the rich and deliver free buses. In four months he has dropped the free bus proposal, replaced a wealth tax with a token fee on secondary residences, and is managing a \$4.5 billion budget deficit through pension delays and cost-cutting that will fall directly on transit workers. He has made two friendly visits to the Trump White House and endorsed Hochul for re-election.

Hochul, who oversees the MTA, vetoed legislation requiring two-person train crews, handing management a future job-cut weapon. When 15,000 New York City nurses struck earlier this year, she signed executive orders allowing unlicensed scabs to break the strike. She is now openly preparing the same against any LIRR walkout, relying on the TWU bureaucracy to keep city bus drivers off the picket lines.

For subway and bus workers, the MTA has budgeted a provocative 2 percent annual raise—half the city’s 4 percent annual inflation rate as of March 2026. TWU Local 100 officials have filed 37 contract demands but refused to put specific numbers behind their call for “substantial” raises.

The five LIRR unions have already conceded the same 9.5 percent over three years accepted by other MTA unions and are now asking 5 percent in the fourth year. The MTA has offered 3 percent—or 4.5 percent, contingent on work-rule “productivity” concessions, which simply means more work for less. In the context of Trump’s tariff escalation and ongoing cost-of-living increases, even a 5 percent raise could become a real-wage cut before the ink dries.

A record of struggle — and betrayal

In 1966, New York City transit workers conducted a historic 12-day strike, defying anti-strike injunctions and the jailing of TWU President Mike Quill by Mayor John Lindsay, winning major pay raises for 33,000 workers. In 1968, the MTA was established and pensions put in a public retirement system, which allowed those hired before 1973 to retire at the age of 55 with full benefits.

In April 1980, more than a year before Reagan smashed the PATCO air traffic controllers with no resistance from the AFL-CIO, transit workers launched an 11-day strike demanding 15 and 10 percent annual raises to address runaway inflation costs. The walkout ended after a fact-finding board recommended a 23 percent wage increase over two years—paid for by raising subway fares, fining the TWU \$1 million, and docking workers two days’ pay for every strike day. The deal was opposed by Ed Winn, a member of the Workers League—forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party—whom rank-and-file workers had elected to the TWU Local 100 executive board on a socialist program and the principle of political independence from both capitalist parties.

The TWU would not call another strike for 25 years. In December 2005, transit workers walked out again, but the leadership shut the powerful strike down in three days. Beyond a \$2.5 million Taylor Law fine, the union lost automatic dues check-off. In a court affidavit, TWU President Roger Toussaint pledged that the union “does not assert the right to strike against any government” and would not participate in any strike against a “governmental employer”—now or in the future. In return, a state Supreme Court judge restored dues check-off, authorizing the transit agency to deposit approximately \$1.5 million a month in union dues directly into the union treasury.

The current leadership has followed the same path of political subordination. In April 2022, TWU Local 100 held a rally where members chanted “Kathy, Kathy!” and officials waved “Labor for Kathy” signs. Union president John Samuelsen—who now calls Hochul “the bosses’ governor”—actively participated. He previously backed Governor Andrew Cuomo for years, even as Cuomo embedded Tier 6 into state law, requiring public employees hired after April 1, 2012, to work longer, contribute more, and receive less. His claim that the union never formally endorsed Hochul is ludicrous: it is inconceivable that TWU Local 100 staged that rally without his full support.

A fighting program

Workers need immediate, substantial wage increases—not a carefully negotiated crawl toward poverty. The restoration of the Cost-of-Living Allowance surrendered by the TWU in 1982 must be a central demand. Workers have been discussing this openly on social media; the union leadership will not raise it—not because it is unrealistic, but because fighting for it means confronting the Democratic Party to which the bureaucracy is organically tied.

The decisive question is not whether the union leadership will call a strike on May 16. It is whether workers are organized independently of the union apparatus and capable of fighting regardless of what the bureaucracy does. New York transit and LIRR workers must build rank-and-file committees—democratically run, answerable to the membership, and completely independent of union officials, the Democratic Party and management’s political allies—uniting subway workers, bus operators and LIRR and Metro-North workers, and reaching out to riders, nurses, postal workers, teachers and every section of the working class fighting the same ruling class across the metro region.

The specific demands that must anchor this fight: immediate double-digit wage increases to offset years of inflation and concession contracts; 100 percent COLA pegged to the real cost of living; rejection of all work-rule concessions; fully paid pensions and retiree medical benefits with elimination of all inferior pension tiers (2 through 6); two-person crews on all passenger trains; and no fare hikes—transit must be funded by taxing the oligarchs, not the four million workers who ride the system daily.

The struggle of New York transit and rail workers is not a local labor dispute. It is one front of a global class war. The same ruling class gutting transit in New York funds the destruction of cities in the Middle East and provokes confrontation with nuclear-armed states. The answer is the international unity of the working class against a capitalist system that produces war and austerity as its twin products. Transit workers should contact the WSWS to get information on building rank-and-file committees. The question before every worker is: who controls this struggle—the bureaucracies that have surrendered over and over, or the rank and file?

Fill out the form below for information on building rank-and-file committees.



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wsws.org/contact