

# New York City transit workers confront need for fight against Wall Street and Mamdani

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A major class battle is brewing this weekend in New York City. On May 16, contracts covering more than 40,000 subway and bus workers expire. The same day, 3,500 Long Island Rail Road workers in five unions become legally free to strike against the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA).

A combined walkout at the two MTA systems would shut down mass transit for more than 4 million daily riders, bringing economic activity to a halt at the center of American and world finance. It would have the widespread support of the working class and could become the spark of a far broader movement in New York City and across the country. It would also set the tone for other major class struggles, including the expiration in November of the contract covering 100,000 municipal workers in AFSCME District Council 37.

The MTA has budgeted a 2 percent annual wage increase for workers in a city where inflation runs at 4 percent and median rents for a two-bedroom apartment reach nearly \$6,000 a month. While not part of the contract negotiations, New York Governor Kathy Hochul also vetoed a law requiring the maintenance of two-person crews on subway trains, leaving the door open for major job cuts down the road. Workers hired after 2012 are locked into an inferior pension scheme, and 15,000 transit retirees have been transferred onto privatized Medicare Advantage plans. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, at least 146 MTA workers died by the autumn of 2020 because management kept them on the job without adequate protection.

The conflict pits the working class in an exceptionally sharp form against the financial oligarchy. New York State's 154 billionaires have more than \$1 trillion in wealth. Wall Street bonuses alone reached a record \$49.2 billion last year. The ruling class claims there is "no money" for wages that keep pace with inflation, but no expense is spared to bail out Wall Street when its bets run

bad. The MTA itself pays 15 to 20 percent of its entire operating budget servicing \$49 billion in bonds to Wall Street investors, with the largest positions held by BlackRock.

The WSWs and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) urge transit workers to form independent rank-and-file committees at every depot and line, so they can prepare for the fight on their own terms—maintain control over decisions, block sellouts by the union bureaucracy and mobilize the broadest possible support throughout the working class.

Such committees are essential to prepare for a confrontation with the entire capitalist political establishment—not only Governor Hochul, but also New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America.

Mamdani's election was a sign of the deep-seated hatred of capitalism and the radicalization of the working class. But his administration governs on behalf of finance capital, using insincere populist and "radical" phrases to cover policies of austerity and repression.

Mamdani betrayed the aspirations expressed in that vote before he even took office. He met with Wall Street executives to assure them that New York City remained in reliable hands. And he has made two visits to Donald Trump's White House, one before and one after his election, touting a "partnership" with the fascist president on "affordability."

Mamdani has dropped his popular proposal for free city buses and abandoned a millionaires' tax as part of his alliance with Governor Hochul. His property tax hike—one of the few revenue measures not requiring the governor's approval—was quietly ditched this week, as Mamdani and Hochul jointly announced a \$4 billion budget deal cementing their alliance at the precise moment the transit deadline arrives.

At the request of Wall Street, Mamdani has kept

billionaire heiress Jessica Tisch as police commissioner. His NYPD arrested 13 striking New York City nurses, while Hochul directed the scabbing operation against them. His administration is now facilitating ICE raids across the city, including at a Brooklyn hospital, where officers attacked protesters and cleared a path for federal agents.

Good pay and benefits and affordable public transit can only be won through struggle, including a strike. Everything workers have ever won has come in defiance of anti-strike laws, court injunctions, the police and other methods used by the ruling class to crush working class resistance and declare it “illegal.”

In 1966, the New York City transit workers defeated attempts to crush a strike through the anti-worker Condon-Wadlin Act and the jailing Transport Workers Union Local 100 President Mike Quill. The ruling class responded by passing the infamous Taylor Law, which prohibits strikes.

In 1980, the TWU called off the strike at precisely the point where Mayor Ed Koch was on the verge of defeat. The only member of the executive board to oppose this was Ed Winn, a leading member of the Workers League, forerunner to the Socialist Equality Party. Winn explained that the outcome was because union officials “refused to break from the capitalist Democratic Party and challenge the so-called right of a few billionaire bankers to dictate wage concessions, layoffs and cuts in social services.”

In 2005 workers walked out in defiance of the Taylor Law and the city’s billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The strike won powerful public support, but the TWU bureaucracy shut it down after 60 hours.

The response of the TWU was to declare: “Never Again.” In 2008, TWU Local 100 President Roger Toussaint signed an affidavit promising never to strike again in exchange for the restoration of automatic dues check-off system. This secured the financial position of the union bureaucracy in exchange for the workers’ inalienable rights.

Today, TWU International President John Samuelson sat on Mamdani’s transition team. He now calls Hochul “the bosses’ governor”—But in 2022 he led chants of “Kathy! Kathy!” at a rally as officials waved “Labor for Kathy” signs.

At a recent rally, TWU officials held a banner declaring, “Will strike, if provoked.” But the TWU bureaucracy has made no plans for such a strike and is scurrying to sign a last-minute deal.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File

Committees (IWA-RFC) urges transit workers to prepare now. Rank-and-file committees must be built at every depot and line, reaching out now to nurses, municipal workers, teachers, postal workers and other workers.

**Transit workers should hold their own meetings to decide on their demands in the contract. These should include:**

**Immediate, substantial wage increases to offset years of inflation and concession contracts, with full cost-of-living allowance (COLA) pegged to the real cost of living**

**Rejection of all work-rule concessions**

**• Elimination of all inferior pension tiers (Tier 2 through Tier 6) and fully paid retiree medical benefits—no Medicare Advantage**

**Two-person crews on all passenger trains**

**No fare hikes—Mass transit must be funded by taxing the oligarchs, not the riders**

Rank-and-file committees should insist that, if LIRR workers walk out on May 16, TWU members must honor their picket lines and organize to refuse any attempt by the government or the bureaucracy to force them to scab.

They should also demand that the MTA’s \$49 billion bond debt be canceled, with the funds currently consumed by debt service redirected to pay good wages, establish free bus fares, and fund needed maintenance and infrastructure. The Taylor Law must be repealed, and workers should demand the TWU repudiate its no-strike affidavit, while preparing themselves to act independently of the apparatus.

The rank-and-file committees that transit workers build now are the organizational embryo of a broader movement, one that breaks politically from the Democratic Party, rejects every attempt to subordinate workers to Wall Street’s “budget realism” and takes aim at the wealth and power of the financial oligarchy itself. This means fighting for a socialist program: expropriating the banks, major investors and corporate monopolies that bleed the transit system through debt service and austerity, and placing the MTA and essential infrastructure under democratic working class control.



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