

Long Island Rail Road workers strike; Mamdani supports scabbing operations

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Around 3,500 workers on the Long Island Rail Road, the largest commuter rail in the United States, launched a strike Saturday morning for the first time in 32 years. The strike coincided with the expiration of a contract for 40,000 subway and bus workers in New York City's transit system in Transport Workers Union Local 100.

The strike is a major political confrontation in the center of world finance, pitting workers against Wall Street and its political agents, above all the Democratic Party. It raises the question: Who runs New York, the financial oligarchy or the working class?

Workers are striking against intolerable conditions. "By the time you look, a \$1,000 check just dropped down to almost \$300—for a company or organization that's making billions of dollars," station worker Kristen told the WSWS about runaway living expenses. "It's unfair in one of the richest cities in the world."

The cost of living has forced her to relocate: "I had to move to another state, which is [New] Jersey ... in order to still be able to be above water." Kristen also described the humiliating conditions attached to sick leave—each of the 12 annual days requires a doctor's note, a \$30 copay, and submission within 72 hours, on penalty of points and possible suspension. "If we go on maternity leave, sometimes that takes six to eight weeks. If we use up those 12 days, we're not getting paid the remainder. It's a lot of unfairness, it's a lot of injustice."

Reggie, a New York City Transit conductor with 20 years on the job, told the WSWS that wages have never kept pace with the cost of living. "I don't feel like I'm middle class anymore," he said. "I feel like it's either lower class or high-income earners." He described being required to report in snowstorms and severe weather with no hazard pay. "They consider us essential workers when they want us to come to work in any condition, but to pay us, they don't pay us like essential workers."

The Metropolitan Transit Authority, which operates the LIRR and the New York City subway and bus system, is responding ruthlessly, threatening to fire probationary workers if they take part in the strike. It is also attempting to break the strike using city buses.

MTA bus drivers in the Transport Workers Union must reject

this attempt to force them to scab on the strike. Not only does this undermine their own contract struggle, it violates the principle that "an injury to one is an injury to all" and allows management to divide and conquer. Significantly, the TWU has not released an official statement opposing the strikebreaking operation.

Transit workers, who have a long history of militant struggle, must halt the strikebreaking operation and launch their own strike, linking with LIRR workers in a common fight to win the demands of all MTA workers.

Winning the strike requires the support of the whole working class. City workers must rally behind the strike and prepare joint actions. Rank-and-file committees must be built uniting LIRR workers with workers in transit and other sectors, developing into a broader movement fighting for the redistribution of the oligarchy's wealth and funding for affordable housing and other pressing social needs.

That political energy exists. Over one million New Yorkers voted for Zohran Mamdani for mayor, a candidate calling himself a socialist, because of their deep hatred of inequality and capitalism. But Mamdani is actively collaborating with pro-business Governor Kathy Hochul on a strikebreaking operation, without offering even verbal support for the striking workers.

His only public statement directed positive attention to the MTA's strikebreaking shuttle buses: "City Hall and agencies across the administration are actively coordinating preparedness and contingency efforts to help maintain continuity for commuters and support New Yorkers as conditions evolve ... The MTA has announced that limited weekday bus service will be available for essential workers and others who cannot telecommute."

Mamdani and the political establishment do not care about "essential workers." What they fear is that a joint LIRR-New York City transit strike would encourage a broader movement of workers against the corporate and financial elite.

Mamdani's statement follows the abandonment of his free bus fare proposal, continuous meetings with Wall Street executives, and visits to Trump's White House to reassure corporate America. He has kept billionaire heiress Jessica Tisch as NYPD commissioner, oversaw the arrest of 13 striking nurses in January, and worked with ICE to carry out raids in

hospitals and other parts of the city.

Last week, Mamdani reached a \$4 billion agreement with Hochul to close the city's budget deficit, primarily through suspending pension payments and mandating smaller school class sizes. A fig leaf "pied-à-terre" tax on secondary residences of the wealthy was included to allow him to save face.

Mamdani called his "collaboration" with Hochul a "model" when he endorsed her re-election in February. Hochul, for her part, has declared the strike "reckless" and denounced LIRR workers. "These unions represent the highest paid workers of any railroad in the nation, yet they are demanding contracts that could raise fares as much as 8%, pit workers against one another, and risk tax hikes for Long Islanders."

The claim that decent pay must be offset at riders' expense is absurd. The MTA pays around 15 percent of its entire operating budget servicing \$49 billion in bond debt, the largest positions held by BlackRock, Vanguard and Fidelity. Wall Street bonuses alone reached a record \$49.2 billion last year. Cancellation of this debt would be the first step toward providing free transit to commuters.

A train cleaner at the Hudson Yards subway station captured the connection between the strike and the broader conditions facing workers across the city. "All of us face the same problem—workers on trains, buses, city workers," he told the WWSWS. "They want to slash our conditions. If we do not unite, it will get worse."

He continued: "We have no business being at war in the Strait of Hormuz. War is started for those who have the money. But it affects construction, nursing, hospitals. They are fighting for resources across the planet."

Workers must fight for the redirection of Wall Street profits—not a marginal tax tweak but the requisitioning of oligarchic wealth—to pay for wages, free transit, housing and infrastructure. Every attempt to pit workers against the riding public must be rejected. "I think it could work," Reggie said. "If the people stick to the agenda and we don't give in, no matter what."

In fighting for these urgent demands, workers are coming into direct conflict with a capitalist political system that treats the fortunes of the oligarchy as inviolable and deploys its laws, parties and institutions to defend them.

The state's infamous Taylor Law bans all strikes by public employees, including MTA workers, and its threat is likely being used by politicians and union bureaucrats to frog-march shuttle bus drivers into scabbing on the LIRR strike. LIRR workers themselves fall under the separate federal Railway Labor Act, a century-old law designed to prevent the powerful national rail strikes that shook American capitalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Victory requires that workers establish their own initiative, independent of the union bureaucracy, which is integrated with the political establishment at every level. Workers must be on

guard against any attempt by the bureaucracy to shut the strike down before their demands have been met, as happened when officials ended a three-day NJ Transit strike last May.

The LIRR strike took place only after the union bureaucracy twice blocked strikes by appealing to Trump to impose legally binding mediation under the Railway Labor Act. The same unions worked to delay a national rail strike in 2022 until Congress had time to impose a contract.

As for the Transport Workers Union, its International President John Samuelson sat on Mamdani's transition team, while TWU Local 100 endorsed Hochul for governor in 2022. In 2008, following the use of the Taylor Law against workers in the 2005 strike, the union signed away workers' right to strike in order to restore \$1.5 million a month in automatic dues check-off.

The strike can be won, but it depends on the degree of unity workers can build and their ability to act against interference from the union bureaucracy and the state. Transit workers have a history of defying anti-strike laws, which have always been deployed against every attempt to win fundamental rights, including in 1966, 1980 and 2005.

Transit workers also have a rich tradition of anti-capitalist politics, including Trotskyist transit workers Ed Winn and Edwin Soto. In 1980, Ed Winn was the only member of the TWU Local 100 executive board to oppose the union's premature shutdown of the strike at the point where Mayor Ed Koch was on the verge of surrender.

The rebellion against the apparatus must take the form of rank-and-file committees at every depot, line and station, uniting workers across the transit system and drawing in support from nurses, teachers, municipal workers and riders. TWU bus drivers must refuse to operate scab shuttles.

These committees must fight for immediate, substantial wage increases with a full cost-of-living allowance; the elimination of all inferior pension tiers; two-person crews on all passenger trains; and free transit for all—paid for through the cancellation of the MTA's \$49 billion bond debt, redirecting funds currently extracted by Wall Street bondholders to improved wages and fare reductions. Workers must also prepare a political fight against the Railway Labor Act and the Taylor Law as instruments of class rule.

We urge LIRR and transit workers to contact the WWSWS and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) for information on forming rank-and-file committees.



To contact the WWSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact