

New York subway and bus workers enter second week without contract, as MTA demands austerity

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New York transit workers: Fill out the form at the end of this article to tell us what you are demanding in the new contract. All comments will remain anonymous.

More than 40,000 New York City subway and bus workers have been kept on the job nearly two weeks since the labor agreement between Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) expired on May 16. The struggle, in which the central issues are wages keeping pace with the cost of living and fighting work rule concessions, is a major struggle with national and international significance.

Management is “offering” a pathetic 2 percent annual wage increase, less than half the city’s current inflation rate of 4.6 percent. It is also calling for more than doubling health insurance costs and imposing sharp restrictions on overtime eligibility. It wants to force workers to give at least 4 hours’ notice before calling in sick, guaranteeing countless people will be forced to work through illness.

Separately, management is preparing the way to reduce subway crews from two people to one after the state’s Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul vetoed a bill mandating two-person crews in December.

The claim that there is “no money” to meet transit workers’ demands is absurd in New York City, the center of the global economy and the richest city in the world. In reality, trillions are hoarded by Wall Street firms and the city’s 154 billionaires. The MTA’s position amounts to a refusal to accept even the most microscopic concessions to workers, indicating that the contract struggle is a fight of the working class against inequality and the power of the financial oligarchy.

In comments to the WSWS, most MTA workers said wages keeping pace with inflation were the main issue,

but not the only one. “How can we pick one?” a cleaning worker said. “It’s everything. Tier 6 [the lowest tier of MTA pensions for workers hired after April 2012] is a joke. Medical is a joke. Even the wages are a joke. I know we’re going to end up giving things up like we always do. And [MTA head] Janno Lieber makes \$400,000 a year?”

A train operator commented, “Why is it that every contract we get, we are worse off?”

On inequality, one worker said: “The benefits aren’t going to the people. There has to be a balance, and that’s what people are thinking about more” in New York City.

Another cleaner explained that she needed better dental insurance from the contract. Health coverage has gotten worse over the years, to the point where she is getting billed for routine procedures that used to be covered.

“Then there are the night differentials that should be higher. There’s safety concerns. It’s a long list. The 2 percent [wage increase] that the MTA is offering is an insult,” she said. “It’s not even worth having a conversation about.” She explained that the MTA executives are pulling in hundreds of thousands per year, while they can’t even provide enough cleaning supplies to workers.

A train conductor said: “The cost of living is terrible. It’s the worst I’ve ever seen it in this city. Food is up, fuel is up. Three percent is not going to work.” When told the MTA’s actual initial offer was 2 percent, he replied: “Well, that’s really not going to work then.”

He continued: “I rent right now, but I’m trying to save up to buy a house. If it continues like this, that’s going to get harder and harder. Gas is out of control. I drive to work, 20 minutes each way. I was talking with my wife, thinking about moving out of the city to somewhere like Pennsylvania or New Jersey. Gas is cheaper there, rent is cheaper there. But the problem is, the taxes are high

everywhere.”

Several cleaning workers pointed to the new restrictions on overtime as a big issue, given their inability to make enough money on their normal schedules.

Several workers described the hazards of the job, including confronting the consequences of the social crisis in New York on a daily basis. “Safety is a big issue. We see the worst of the city, the tensions. People are frustrated trying to get by here, and they sometimes take it out on us.”

A train operator said: “We see first hand all of the problems in the city. People are tense, say someone bumps into you and they don’t say ‘sorry,’ things can go left real quick. And it’s because people are struggling to get by. So this is the kind of thing we deal with.”

Cleaners, conductors and train operators described the difficulty of dealing with homelessness, mental illness and drug addiction in the system. One worker explained that he was recently jabbed by a needle while cleaning a subway car—and was denied time off after the incident.

Another pointed to the phenomenon of “subway surfing” where young people attempt to ride on the roof of the train. On Sunday, 14-year-old boy was killed attempting to subway surf.

The MTA struggle has enormous potential to become the spearhead of a broader class movement. On the same day the contract expired, 3,500 workers on the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) walked out in a strike that lasted three days. Management refused an extremely modest wage demand of 4.5 percent for the last year of a four-year deal—The last contract expired in 2023, meaning the wage increases for the first three years will be retroactive. Throughout, management cynically tried to pit riders against workers by claiming the increase could only be offset through fare increases.

Many workers declared their support for the Long Island Rail Road strike. “We were all for the [LIRR] strike. What we didn’t like was how Hochul and Lieber tried to demonize them, paint them like they were selfish,” one worker said.

Another said: “I supported the strike. They did what they had to do. But at least they can strike, we have to deal with the Taylor Law.” A coworker interjected: “We should do what they did!”

A younger train operator declared: “We should strike like the LIRR workers. Cost of living is hard. Food, housing, fuel is going up. It seems our wages should keep pace with that, right?”

The biggest obstacle to building this movement is the

union bureaucracy. Despite enormous popular support, the union bureaucrats shut the LIRR strike down suddenly and without any input from workers, at the moment it was having its biggest effect at the start of the work week. Since then, LIRR workers have not been given any information about the deal, though management, union officials, Governor Kathy Hochul and Mayor Zohran Mamdani have all seen it. Workers received only a short email claiming 4.5 percent, a concession on 16 hours of unpaid computer training and contract extensions.

Kevin Sexton, the head of the Teamsters-aligned Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET), explained why no details had been released: “We don’t want to go into specifics [because] we don’t want to fail ratification. If they get part of this story through the media, it may impact their decision.” Management, relying on the bureaucracy to push the deal through, has also not said anything. MTA CEO Janno Lieber told the press last Wednesday, “We are letting the union follow the *normal ritual* [emphasis added] of letting the unions go through their ratification process before ... the details then become public.” He did, however, boast that the cost of the deal was “within the MTA’s financial plan.”

As for the TWU, which covers the 40,000 MTA subway and bus workers, the bureaucracy is integrated with the Democrats. Local 100 in New York City endorsed pro-business Hochul in 2022, and International President John Samuelson sat on the Mamdani transition team. In 2008, the union signed a court affidavit foreswearing any claim to the right to strike, under the terms of the anti-labor Taylor Law, in exchange for restoration of automatic dues check-off.

A younger worker said, “I’m newer so I don’t know everything about it, but I do know some people are upset about some things. Me, I don’t like the way they have it written down that we can’t strike [due to the Taylor Law]. They talk in union orientation about the earlier strikes [in 1966, 1980 and 2005]. But how are we supposed to win anything if we can’t strike?”

The WSWS is calling for a no vote, the development of rank-and-file committees to assert democratic control and prepare a joint struggle with MTA workers, and an appeal to workers across the city for support.



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