

“It requires a fight”: NYC transit worker speaks out on contract demands

Daniel de Vries, Tom Hall
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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.

Around 40,000 subway and bus workers in New York City’s Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) remain on the job more than two weeks since their collective bargaining agreement expired. Their determination to fight significant concessions demanded by management, while winning pay increases to keep pace with inflation and other key demands, is bringing them into direct conflict with both management and the union bureaucracy.

Workers are fighting against the staggering inequality and corporate oligarchy centered in the world’s financial capital. The consequences of decades of neglect of the transport infrastructure were underscored last Friday when a fire broke out in Penn Station, the country’s busiest train station and located only a few miles from Wall Street, injuring five people.

Management claims that wages keeping pace with inflation, currently running at 4.6 percent in New York City, are “unaffordable.” Its initial “offer” was only 2 percent annually, combined with a doubling of healthcare contributions by workers and sharp limits on overtime and sick leave.

The three-day strike last month by 3,500 Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) workers was an opening stage in this struggle. The LIRR, New York City’s busiest commuter rail system, is part of the MTA although under a separate contract. The three-day strike was shut down abruptly without any input from the membership, while union officials refused to release details, on the grounds that they did “not want to fail ratification.” The shutdown underscored the role of the bureaucracy in limiting the struggle and bypassing the democratic will of members.

The four-year deal includes 4.5 percent for next year, barely keeping pace with inflation. This falls well below what workers need, but even this triggered alarm bells in the corporate media, which is worried it will only embolden workers in Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 to hold out for more.

On Saturday, a track maintenance worker spoke with the WSWS on the issues in the contract.

“I’m glad that they reached a decision, an agreement [on the Long Island Rail Road], and I hope that we don’t even have to go through that process. If we don’t have to go on strike, it would be a great situation if we make moves.”

But, he stressed, meeting their demands required a fight. “They wanted to isolate the struggle. That they want to go ahead and pin us against each other, which shouldn’t be done. We’re under the same umbrella, so we need to get the same love or the same appreciation as LIRR or as Metro-North [the other MTA-operated commuter railroad]. Sometimes as transit, we don’t see that. They want to cut our wages. We contribute a large majority to our health care.”

Asked what he is demanding in the new contract, he explained: “I’m trying to make sure that we get a contract that’s better than the ... wages that we have going on now. So we can fight for something at a good number [i.e., percent wage increases]. And usually, you know, they’re not going to give us that number. That’s why you’ve only got to fight for something higher.”

He pointed to sharp limits on overtime as one of his key issues. “There should be no cap [on overtime]. We are capped.” For the lowest Tier 6 workers, those hired after April of 2012, pensionable overtime pay is legally capped at \$21,589. However, a recently signed state law will increase the cap to \$30,000 starting next year.

The union bureaucracy has hailed this as a major

legislative “victory,” with TWU officials boasting that it was the largest increase in the cap since Tier 6 was created and presenting it as proof of their lobbying efforts in Albany. But the higher limits are likely to be offset by management’s proposed contract changes aimed at slashing overtime opportunities altogether.

“So they just kind of improve something for Tier 6, saying that we can be capped at \$30,000. But we shouldn’t be capped at all. We work hard for the money. We should be able to get every dollar that we have. What happened to Trump saying that we’re going to get the tax-free on overtime, you know?”

“But it requires a fight,” he said. “It definitely requires a fight. And the union tries to say, well, we can’t do anything, ‘We’ve got the Taylor law,’ the law in New York state banning public employees from striking. It looks like they point their finger at New York Transit for that Taylor law. But there have been strikes. I could say the teachers union, all the unions were built against them saying you can’t strike. But we have to still fight that.”

Asked by the WSWS whether this fight required “uniting all the workers,” he replied, “I agree with that. That’s the main concern that we have. As I said, they like to put everybody against each other. And then you see that they’ll [claim to] give us a great number but then we’ll get a 2 percent or 1 percent.”

“So now that the LIRR have their [4.5] percent,” he continued, “we want to see something at least like that for the next three, five years ... So, yes, we do need to fight.”

Asked for his thoughts on a general strike he replied: “I have absolutely no problem with that ... This is serious stuff. I have no problem with agreeing with you that Trump is a fascist. I mean, the thing is we shouldn’t be at war, as you know now. Like Iran. Why are we at war? But they say, oh, we’re doing it for Israel. It doesn’t make any sense to be at war. But these are the decisions that the little man, like myself, we don’t make them.”

When asked his thoughts about building rank-and-file committees to unite transit workers in a common fight, he replied: “That’s right. They even play bus drivers against subway workers. [They tell subway workers] ‘You do it better than them or they get more money than you.’ ... And, of course, the union leaders make six-digit salaries.”

When asked about the cost of living in New York City, he replied: “Well, I’m probably in a different situation than a lot of others. But I am definitely being affected by the gas prices, with the price of food, groceries. And just the homeless situation in New York City, everything has just fallen down ... There has to be a big-time cleanup.

“So, just in general, we just want to see the city better. But that takes money. That takes time. And that takes dedication. It takes some effort to get better. Money, of course, is always going to be needed to solve the problems. All the big developers, all they do is build and build and push [workers] out. And all you see is old things going down and new things being built up.

“And now the rent is higher than ever. Did you see how Brooklyn is looking? Did you see how Long Island City is looking? For years, they were depredated areas and now they have drastically changed. They look like Little Manhattan. Now, that means the city is growing and we’re making money. But where is the money going? It’s not going to the little, man. So, it’s got to be going to the bigger corporations and the conglomerates.”

On a rank-and-file committee to unite transit workers, he concluded, “I think I would go for it. I wouldn’t have no qualms of pushing that back. I think I would be in favor. At least seeing how it goes, why not? We already know how things are working for us now.”



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