

“We're getting duped both ways”: New York transit workers speak out on sellout Long Island Rail Road contract and the fight ahead for subway and bus workers

Our reporters

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New York transit workers: Tell us what your conditions are like and what you are fighting for in the new contract! All comments will remain anonymous.

The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 589 said Friday a new contract was ratified by 98 percent for members on the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR). This is the first of five unions voting on a deal struck last month to end a three-day strike on New York City's largest commuter railroad.

The tentative agreement barely keeps pace with inflation in the New York City metropolitan region, currently at 4.6 percent. But the 3,500 LIRR workers are being asked to ratify a deal which they still have not been allowed to see in full, with the union bureaucracy refusing to publish details. “We don't want to fail ratification,” union official Kevin Sexton bluntly explained to reporters when asked why no information had been made public.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is urging workers to vote no on the deal and prepare for a new phase of the struggle uniting with the city's 40,000 subway and bus workers, who have been working on an expired contract for three weeks.

If IBEW members indeed voted 98 percent in favor, this did not indicate mass enthusiasm for the deal, but because they know the bureaucracy will not carry the struggle forward to win real inflation-busting pay increases if they vote it down. “Workers cannot ... wait for ‘approval’ from the apparatus or from the political establishment,” the WSWS declared in a statement. “A serious struggle requires the construction of rank-and-file committees, run democratically, answerable only to the membership and capable of making decisions that the bureaucracy cannot reverse behind closed doors.”

These struggles are two parts of a growing confrontation between the New York working class and the financial oligarchy that dominates the city. It is also a fight against the

Democratic Party, including Governor Kathy Hochul and Mayor Zohran Mamdani, who rule on behalf of Wall Street.

In talks with the Transport Workers Union, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) is demanding even lower wage increases than the LIRR deal, which is between 3 and 4.5 percent over four years. For subway and bus workers, they are demanding 2 percent increases, along with doubled out of pocket healthcare costs and limits to overtime and sick leave

Workers across both bargaining units are being told there is no money—in the financial capital of the world.

At the East New York bus depot

A bus operator with 21 years on the job was direct about where things are headed. “Conditions are worse. I have children, a wife, medications. They are not paying enough.”

Asked about the Long Island Rail Road workers' contract being described as a “victory” in the media, he was dismissive. “What victory? They didn't get the 5 percent. We made a big mistake with the LIRR. All workers should have gone out together. The city cannot run without us.”

He identified the union bureaucracy as the central obstacle. “The problem is even if we manage to close things down in a major way, the union will cave in, and they will give us what they want. The union is not like when ... we had a fighting organization.”

He expressed confidence that workers could build something better. “I believe there will be a better solution coming. But there must be a plan that will work for everyone. My wife is in the CWA [Communication Workers of America]. They have a plan. All unions need to be linked

in together.”

A second bus operator, with 14 years on the job, described in concrete terms what the MTA’s wage offer means in daily life. “You’ve got to tighten up [expenses]. Instead of having your laundry taken out, you’ve got to start doing your laundry. You’ve got to start not stopping in at just any gas station. You’ve got to start looking around for the cheapest prices. Worse gets to worse, you’ve got to start turning in your bottle deposits. Things that normally middle-class people don’t do.”

On the MTA’s claims of having no money, he was unequivocal. “I think they have plenty of money. I think they’re stashing it, they’re hoarding it. They’re not actually telling the public how much they actually have.”

On Mamdani, he echoed his coworker’s skepticism. “There’s not much to say right now. He’s doing basic stuff, road repair. This is what they do.”

A third operator, taking a leaflet, put it simply: “It’s affecting the economy, the workers. Everything is so high. It is too much!”

LIRR worker speaks: “We’re getting duped both ways”

An LIRR worker and member of the Transportation Communications Union (TCU) described a ratification process being conducted with the same contempt for democratic input that characterized the strike itself.

“The union hasn’t been very clear on what is going on. They haven’t talked to us directly. I know they had a meeting maybe last week or so, but they make meetings at certain times and certain places that obviously everybody can’t get to. They don’t try to make it a virtual thing where the people who cannot make it can sit in and listen.”

This exclusion is not accidental, he argued. “This is 2026. Technology is extremely widespread. There is absolutely no reason not to do virtual meetings other than it’s intentional—they want to keep people in the dark.”

He spoke of the importance of unity. “From what I heard from coworkers who attended, they were saying that because everybody joined together in the coalition, it made it easier to fight against the MTA without division. Prior to this strike there was a lot of division within the unions, and it was easier for the MTA to manipulate what was going on.”

But his assessment of the outcome was scathing. “I feel like MTA and TCU needs to be audited for finances. The whole thing was just a money grab. They ended the strike, so now we vote—but they’ve made it clear the contract gets pushed through regardless of the outcome. It’s a double-

edged sword. We’re getting duped both ways.”

He was particularly pointed about what was left off the bargaining table entirely. “TCU basically argued for money. But we only get 12 sick days a year—we should have asked for more. And every time we call in sick, we have to pay \$30 or \$50 in co-pay just to get a doctor’s note. Those are some of the things that should have been fought for.”

The circumstances under which the strike was ended added insult to injury. The deal was announced late Monday night, with no transportation running. “They stopped the strike at roughly 10, 11 o’clock at night. The shuttle buses stopped running at 7. All the workers who had to start their 10-to-6 shift had to figure out a way to get in. And if they didn’t, they got AWOL. It was a tactic—you get an AWOL, you get in trouble, they try to put you time on the street.”

The money spent on the TCU bargaining team during the talks, he said, “should have been for us. We weren’t paid on the picket lines. Everybody took a big hit. And there hasn’t been any talk about reimbursing us for those three days.”

Workers are being offered a \$3,000 payment if enough votes are cast by June 11. If the threshold is not met, workers may wait until September or even December to see any retroactive pay. “My guess? They’re gonna hold it till September, whether they get the votes in or not.”

He was sharp on management’s claim that workers are overpaid. “That’s because during COVID, we were essential workers—of course you’re gonna get overtime. What about now?”

He turned directly on MTA management and the financial interests behind them. “Transit workers deserve the highest rate they can get because they run the city. Without transit, nobody goes anywhere. They don’t wanna give us a living wage, but they created a whole MTA police department to harass people on both railroads. They’re sitting in boats and million-dollar houses—making decisions for us—the ones who really need it.”

The math, he argued, makes the case by itself. “You guys claim you lost \$61 billion a day. What’s 14 percent of \$61 billion? That’s nothing compared to what you’re actually making.” When he laid out this calculation for coworkers who had come away from the union meeting reassured, the response was telling: “They were like, ‘Wow, I didn’t even think of it like that.’” His conclusion was simple: “Just do the numbers. We’re getting crumbs compared to what they’re getting.”



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