

With the World Cup final approaching, is now the time for New York transit workers to prepare a strike?

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More than a month-and-a-half after their contract expired on May 16, 40,000 New York City subway and bus workers remain on the job with wages frozen as the cost of living continues to spike. The Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, which claims to be “at war” with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) over the agency’s draconian wage offer and demands for healthcare givebacks, is seemingly content to drag out the process for months or even years.

Meanwhile, the eyes of the world are on New York. The 2026 FIFA World Cup is by some measures the largest sporting event ever hosted in North America. The New York/New Jersey region is among the tournament’s principal venues, culminating in the final at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey on July 19.

While New York City transit workers don’t directly provide transportation to the stadium, ticket holders depend on public transit to get to the stadium because of FIFA’s decision to ban parking at tournament venues. Beyond that, the World Cup is a major political undertaking—from Mayor Zohran Mamdani’s frequent World Cup public relations stunts to President Donald Trump’s self-appointment as the chair of the tournament’s organizing task force. The hosting of the event is intended to showcase prestige, economic strength and international standing, while masking social realities beneath a veneer of unity.

As such, enormous public and private resources have been mobilized for the 39-day event, with FIFA projected to rake in \$13 billion in revenues. Meanwhile, public transit and other vital everyday services in the host cities face sustained disinvestment.

New York City transit workers keep the city moving

during the World Cup, whatever the human costs. This past week’s dangerous heat wave, with outdoor temperatures exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius) and many subway stations higher still, is just one of the many hazards workers face on a daily basis. And for this, they are being offered a pathetic 2 percent wage increase annually. The MTA is demanding workers pay 50 percent more for healthcare premiums and increased co-pays for hospital visits.

With the World Cup final approaching in less than two weeks, the question naturally arises: is now the time for transit workers to exert their enormous leverage and prepare a strike?

The World Cup itself, while followed by billions worldwide, including in New York City, is an event covered in corruption and political reaction. FIFA is widely despised, hated for its corruption and profit-taking. The 2026 World Cup has set a new low, with seemingly every aspect of the organization tailored to extract the most profit and advance a reactionary political agenda.

The unprecedented decision to reverse a suspension of USA forward Folarin Balogun following a direct intervention by Donald Trump is only the latest obscene spectacle. The list also includes: the farcical “FIFA Peace Prize” awarded to Trump last December; the dynamic pricing of tickets, which has surged prices to thousands of dollars, limiting attendance only to the wealthy; the implementation of commercial breaks midway through each half of all games for the first time in the sport’s history; the travel bans preventing fans from several World Cup nations from attending matches; and the deployment of ICE to US stadiums.

The entire transportation system has likewise been

reorganized around the tournament's commercial and political requirements. In Midtown Manhattan, truck deliveries are restricted for around 11 hours on game days. Many local city buses are curtailed or rerouted to make way for shuttle buses to the stadium.

New Jersey Transit rail service to New York Penn Station is off limits to its 130,000 daily commuters, including the many transit workers who live in New Jersey, from four hours prior to the game's start to three hours after its conclusion, dedicating service during this time exclusively to World Cup ticket holders. This is not driven by capacity constraints. It's a deliberate choice to prioritize operational simplicity and convenience of ticket holders over the daily needs of ordinary riders.

The price of New Jersey Transit train service to MetLife further underscores who the system is being run for. Round-trip train fare between Penn Station and MetLife Stadium has been set at \$98—several times the normal fare for comparable service. Initial reports on ridership indicate that many World Cup attendees avoided the train entirely, with ticket sales initially well below expectations.

The official narrative notwithstanding, the World Cup organization in New York-New Jersey reflects the stark class divide that pervades every aspect of society. An offensive by transit workers, bringing New York City to a halt at the very moment it is front and center before a global audience, would bring this real character of society to the forefront. And it would garner immense support from workers in New York and around the globe who similarly confront a crisis of affordability, increased exploitation and a political system that serves the wealthy.

A strike would immediately place transit workers in conflict with both political parties, including Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul and Mayor Mamdani. No doubt they would attempt to make full use of the Taylor Law to try and break it. But nothing has ever been won without a struggle.

Transit workers have a long history of defying anti-worker and anti-democratic laws, including a sit-down strike in 1937 at a Brooklyn Rapid Transit (BRT) powerhouse, which led to the establishment of the TWU and major walkouts in 1966, 1980, and 2005.

Union officials, however, have refused in advance to organize a fight. In 2008, Transport Workers Union

Local 100 signed a statement forswearing the right to strike.

The union bureaucracy is deliberately isolating workers from different parts of the region's transportation system. TWU Local 100 refused to organize a joint strike against the MTA together with Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) workers who walked out the same day the transit contract expired.

The TWU bureaucracy is deeply integrated into the political establishment, mainly via the Democratic Party. After years of groveling to Governor Andrew Cuomo, TWU Local 100 endorsed his successor, Kathy Hochul, for election in 2022, and the International funneled tens of thousands to her campaign. TWU boss John Samuelson has of late been desperate to distance himself from Hochul, and two TWU locals endorsed her Trump-backed Republican challenger Bruce Blakeman. Samuelson, meanwhile, was appointed to a committee on Mamdani's transition team.

The fight to beat back the demands of the MTA and win raises that are necessary to live will not come from any element of the trade union apparatus or the Democratic and Republican Parties. The World Cup presents a major opportunity to seize the initiative. The money for a decent contract clearly exists. What is required is the organized collective power of the working class to take the struggle into their own hands, independent of the trade union functionaries and politicians. We urge transit workers to act now to build rank-and-file committees at every depot and yard so as not to let the opportunity pass. Fill out the form below to get involved.



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