“The Republicans are the robbers, and the Democrats are driving the getaway car”: New York City transit workers denounce TWU bureaucrats, Mamdani as contract fight drags on

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Are you a New York City transit worker? Fill out the form at the end of the article for more information on building a rank-and-file committee.

Six months after the expiration of their contract, more than 40,000 New York City transit workers remain without a new agreement, as the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) presses for sweeping concessions on wages, healthcare and retirement benefits, and the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 bureaucracy prepares to deliver them.

The workers’ anger is directed, in the first place, at the MTA, a state agency whose board is controlled by appointees of Governor Kathy Hochul. But workers are increasingly shedding illusions in Democratic Socialist Mayor Zohran Mamdani, who is implementing the austerity demands of Wall Street.

Negotiations between the MTA and TWU Local 100 have been infrequent and largely conducted behind closed doors. The agency is demanding that subway, bus and commuter rail workers pay a substantially larger share of their health insurance costs, while seeking to shift additional retiree benefit costs onto the workforce. MTA Chief Executive Officer Janno Lieber has stated openly that the agency must limit labor expenses as it confronts projected operating deficits of $295 million in 2027, $507 million in 2028, $707 million in 2029 and $897 million in 2030—on top of roughly $50 billion in long-term bond debt.

To intensify pressure on workers, the MTA has already terminated an agreement in place since 2017 that allowed longtime employees who had used more than half of their sick days to receive a lump-sum payment upon retirement. A report from the Citizens Budget Commission—a corporate-funded austerity outfit—estimated that shifting more healthcare and retiree benefit costs onto workers could save the agency hundreds of millions of dollars annually.

The human cost of this austerity was made brutally clear in September, when Moet McCullum, a 41-year-old conductor and mother of three with only 11 months on the job, was killed by a southbound D train while setting up flagging protection near Yankee Stadium at River Avenue and East 161st Street in the Bronx. The train operator reported seeing no warning lights before the collision.

McCullum’s death was the product of the MTA’s refusal to protect its workers and of the TWU bureaucracy’s complicity in keeping workers on the job without a contract. She was the latest in a long line of transit workers killed on the job: construction flagger Louis Gray Jr. in 2016, Stephen Livecchi in 2018, and Hilarion Joseph, killed by a D train at 34th Street–Herald Square in 2023, among others. More than 170 transit workers died of COVID-19 during the early years of the pandemic, including 37 in 2021 alone. And the danger is growing: The Federal Transit Administration recorded 38 near misses involving track workers in 2023, up 58 percent from 2022 and 65 percent from 2021.

The response of the union bureaucracy has been to maneuver, not to mobilize. TWU International President John Samuelsen wrote a letter to Local 100 President John Chiarello after receiving the MTA’s latest offer, which Samuelsen himself described as containing “enormous” concessions. Samuelsen declared that, as president of the national union, he can veto any tentative agreement reached between the agency and the local—an obvious attempt to distance himself from the sellout the local is preparing to sign.

The unions are actively subordinating workers to the Mamdani administration and blocking collective action. The Teamsters, Machinists and other unions shut down the Long Island Rail Road strike in May, isolating 3,500 railroad workers and preventing a common strike against the MTA across the authority’s workforce. They have kept 40,000 subway and bus workers on the job for six months without a contract, and they have blocked any strike action by the 90,000 members of AFSCME District Council 37.

Alongside this anger at the MTA and the union machine, the workers are increasingly fed up with Mayor Mamdani. Over the nine months since he took office, the contrast between Mamdani’s supposed opposition to Trump and the oligarchs that run the city and his actual record has become unmistakable. His “affordability” rhetoric has proven to be a cover for his promotion of the Democratic Party establishment and the real estate and other corporate interests that dominate the city.

This has been demonstrated in his repeated meetings with Trump and offers to collaborate with the fascist president to “help” New Yorkers. He has used the anti-strike Taylor Law to deny public school paraprofessionals their $10,000 bonus—workers with starting salaries

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of just $32,000 a year. Mamdani fired Haitian city workers after Trump stripped them of their immigration status and endorsed Hochul, a longtime shill for corporate interests, in the governor's re-election campaign.

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In interviews with the *World Socialist Web Site* at the East New York Bus Depot in Brooklyn, transit workers expressed mounting anger at the Mamdani administration, the MTA and the union bureaucracy—and a growing recognition that the Democrats and Republicans serve the same masters.

One worker summed up the relationship between the two corporate parties bluntly: "The Republicans are the robbers, and the Democrats are driving the getaway car."

Another transit worker recalled that, before taking her job at the East New York facility, she had worked as a FedEx driver who picked up film scripts from the home of Mamdani's mother, the filmmaker Mira Nair, including for the film *Mississippi Masala*. "She was a millionaire," the worker said. "So, when I heard him saying he was going to speak for the working class, I never believed it."

The workers spoke of the daily struggle to survive in a city where the cost of living soars while wages stagnate. "Cost of living, rent is going up, groceries are super expensive, and our salary remains the same," one worker said. "I think we deserve an increase because we're going through so much on a daily basis as far as getting assaulted, getting harassed by passengers. So, yeah, we deserve it."

Noting the death of Moet McCullum, she said, "Yeah, another colleague lost her life. So, yeah, we're deserving of that. It's been, what, a few months since we've been working without a contract. So, hopefully soon they can get that together and we can get a fair increase."

The same worker, an immigrant whose grandmother came to the United States and "struggled and worked hard," expressed sympathy for the families torn apart by the Trump administration's ICE raids, while noting that the real criminals sit at the top. "The politicians, yes. I mean, that's obvious," the worker said, when asked who is committing the crimes. Recalling the 2008 financial crash, the worker added: "None of them were held accountable. Because they're the rich, obviously. We're just the bottom. We're the bottom of the barrel. So they don't care about us."

Asked about mobilizing the power of the working class—transit workers, autoworkers, Amazon workers—in a general strike against the corporations and the politicians they control, another worker responded: "That can do wonders. But we have to all come together. And I think if we do that, we can see changes. But a lot of people are not willing to risk their jobs. They are scared."

Another worker expressed support for an industrial and political counter-offensive by workers, putting the matter in starker terms. "You can't expect the cycle to change if you don't break the cycle. If you want it to change, you got to do something about it."

Workers were overwhelmingly disgusted with both corporate-controlled parties. The two-party system, one said, was "just a smokescreen. They work for the same people and have the same agenda, pretty much, but they sell it differently." Asked what the agenda was, he said, "To have the working class be the slave class. You're just working for no reason. Everything you have to pay for. It's almost getting to a point where it feels like you got to pay to breathe."

The workers were skeptical of Mamdani's populist posturing. One said he would "like to watch Mamdani for another year or so and see how he does. I don't want to judge so far, but he speaks a good game. We'll see." He was surprised to learn that Mamdani had fired Haitian city workers after Trump ended their sanctions, and that he had invoked the Taylor Law against paraprofessionals. "It doesn't seem like something that Mamdani really campaigned for. It is surprising."

Asked what would happen when workers learn the full truth of the gap between Mamdani's rhetoric and his policies, he warned: "New York is a tough spot to really run around and play stupid games. Workers don't like getting lied to. Absolutely. People in general, nobody likes getting lied to."

The workers also saw through the Democrats' post-election talk of "bipartisanship" with Trump. "I think they kind of like to ruffle feathers and to shake the cage a little bit and get people riled up so that they don't really think critically," one worker said. "A lot of people are just angry. And they like to feed off of that anger and take advantage of it. And that's why New York is the way it is now. Because everyone's in survival mode and they're angry."

The anger expressed by these workers is the product of decades of eroding living standards and working conditions, overseen by the Democratic and Republican parties and the TWU bureaucracy, which has repeatedly rammed through concessionary contracts while suppressing any independent struggle. The union officials, as one worker put it, are "in bed with the politicians. I've been hearing that for years."

The task facing transit workers is to break with this entire apparatus. The fight cannot be left to the TWU bureaucracy, which is preparing to deliver the MTA's demands for healthcare and pension concessions. Workers must build independent rank-and-file committees, outside and against the union machine, to organize the struggle for wages that keep pace with the cost of living, for safe working conditions, and against every concession. And that struggle must be waged on the basis of a socialist program, against the Mamdani administration, the Hochul-controlled MTA and the entire political establishment that serves the oligarchy.

As one worker concluded, when asked about the working class uniting across all races and nationalities to fight for its interests: "People aren't happy and then they revolt."

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