Retired New York City transit worker speaks on Mamdani, the TWU bureaucracy and the fight for the political independence of the working class

Sandy English
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The World Socialist Web Site *recently interviewed Allen Cherry, a retired New York City Transit train operator and longstanding member of the Socialist Equality Party and its predecessor, the Workers League. Joining the subway system in 1982, Allen worked for 27 years as a conductor and train operator. This discussion, reviewing the struggles of Allen and the Workers League inside the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), takes place as the Transport Workers Union (TWU) and other city unions work to suppress emerging struggles among transit and municipal workers amid a global working-class upsurge and the midterm electoral repudiation of Donald Trump.*

WSWS: As you know, City Council legislation is proposing a one-time $10,000 bonus for low-paid Department of Education paraprofessionals, but Democratic Mayor Zohran Mamdani, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), is challenging the bonus in court, arguing that any raise must be negotiated under the Taylor Law. What is your view of this?

Allen Cherry: He is using the reactionary, anti-strike Taylor Law and the capitalist state to repress the working class. Despite calling himself a socialist, Mamdani is acting as an enemy of the working class and socialism. The capitalist class relies on pseudo-socialists like the DSA to trap working-class anger within the political establishment. His friendly relationship with Trump and his invocation of the Taylor Law expose his real role.

WSWS: Transit workers have also been working under an expired contract since May under the Taylor Law.

AC: Yes, and as inflation rises, their real wages are falling significantly. Confronted with the Taylor Law, with its draconian fines for participating in an allegedly "illegal" strike, transit workers face endless MTA concession demands. After the 2005 strike, the union agreed to an unprecedented 1.5 percent wage deduction for health benefits. That later rose to 2 percent, and now the MTA is demanding even steeper givebacks. Once you accept concessions, you open the door to larger ones.

Any fighting leadership would have struck on May 16, when the subway contract expired on the exact same day that five Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) unions walked out. It was a prime opportunity for unified action, but the TWU bureaucracy refused to violate the Taylor Law. Mamdani's role in that strike was equally reactionary: He made clear he would deploy city buses to break the LIRR workers' strike.

Entering transit in the shadow of the 1980 strike, Reagan's union-busting

WSWS: You joined New York City Transit in July 1982 as a conductor, becoming a train operator 18 months later. What were conditions like in transit and nationally when you started?

AC: I entered the system two years after the 1980 transit strike, one year after Ronald Reagan crushed the PATCO air traffic controllers, and seven years after the 1975 New York City fiscal crisis.

Nationally, 1981–1982 was a turning point. Jimmy Carter and the Democrats drafted the plans to break PATCO, and Reagan executed them, firing and blacklisting over 11,000 controllers. In response, over half a million workers marched in Washington D.C. on September 19, 1981, Solidarity Day, with the PATCO strikers out in front. Throughout the country, the Workers League gathered thousands of signatures demanding the AFL-CIO call a general strike to defend PATCO, which the bureaucracy ignored. That betrayal launched a decade of union-busting: at Phelps Dodge, Greyhound, Hormel, Wheeling-Pittsburgh, the airlines, in the coalfields and elsewhere—marking the transformation of the official unions into corporatist arms of management and the state.

In New York, municipal union leaders had already used workers' pension funds in 1975 to bail out the city, subordinating workers to the Municipal Assistance Corporation (Big MAC)—a dictatorship of Wall Street banks that slashed services and laid off thousands. Then came the 11-day 1980 transit strike, which the TWU leadership called off in a sellout that subjected members to the full weight of the Taylor Law.

By 1982, the unions were in sharp decline and deeply alienated from the rank and file. Workers were discouraged, angry and constantly asking, "Where is the union? What is it doing for us?" The Local 100 bureaucracy was so defensive that at union meetings, officials coached us: "If anyone asks where the union is, tell them it's here doing a great job!" Workers saw through that and used the word "union" as an insult.

WSWS: How did the Taylor Law fines affect workers? Why did you tell your coworkers another strike was inevitable?

AC: Under the Taylor Law, striking public workers not only lose a day's pay for every day out, they are fined an additional day's pay—a two-for-one penalty that devastated household budgets. One coworker showed me a paycheck for a single cent after strike deductions and refused the Transit Authority's demand that he cash it for their bookkeeping.

Because of those fines, many workers believed another strike would never happen. As a Trotskyist, I patiently explained that another walkout was inevitable. Capitalism is a bankrupt system driven to continually attack living standards and shop floor conditions. When workers are pushed to the wall, they are compelled to fight back; a repressive law cannot abolish the class struggle. I told them an explosion would come, even if it took a form outside the traditional unions.

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Both Democrats and Republicans enacted the Taylor Law in 1967 because its predecessor, the 1947 Condon-Wadlin Act, had failed. Condon-Wadlin mandated firing striking public employees, which proved unenforceable during 1966 strike of 30,000 transit workers led by TWU President Mike Quill. You cannot immediately replace tens of thousands of skilled operators without paralyzing the financial center of world capitalism.

Instead, the Taylor Law granted unions formal collective bargaining and automatic dues checkoff in exchange for banning strikes, imposing two-for-one worker fines, and threatening the union treasury and dues checkoff if a walkout occurred. That dues-checkoff penalty was deliberately designed to turn the union apparatus into the state's policeman on the job. Though the bureaucracy initially denounced the law, it soon embraced it as a weapon against its own members.

Ed Winn and the fight for a socialist program

WSWS: You worked closely with Ed Winn. Who was he, and what role did he play in Local 100 and the socialist movement?

AC: Ed Winn was a veteran bus mechanic in Surface Maintenance at the East New York depot and a leader of the Workers League—an extraordinary cadre and perhaps the most politically advanced worker in the country. Elected to the Local 100 Executive Board, Ed opposed the 1980 strike sellout and voted against the settlement.

In Surface Maintenance, workers admired Ed because he was fearless, uncorrupted and never treated grievances as mere technical disputes. I remember sitting with him in a restaurant near the East New York depot when an agitated worker came in after being written up for lateness. Ed told him directly: "You have to be a good worker, show up on time, and deny management any easy pretext to victimize you—and you have to fight for a political alternative, for socialism." He always connected shop floor defense to breaking with the capitalist parties. Even workers who didn't fully agree with his politics respected him deeply, and several attended Workers League meetings.

Ed ran as the Workers League candidate for US President in 1984 and 1988, campaigning among transit workers, autoworkers and miners to demonstrate what independent working-class politics looked like. He passed away in 1995.

WSWS: You also ran for union office early in your career. What was your platform, and how did workers respond?

AC: Before completing my first year—while still on probation and most vulnerable to firing—I ran as an independent socialist candidate for the Local 100 Executive Board in Rapid Transit Operations (RTO). Collecting enough signatures to get on the ballot against entrenched bureaucratic slates was difficult, but I campaigned openly on breaking from the Democrats and Republicans to build a Labor Party pledged to socialist policies.

I won roughly 25 percent of the vote among conductors and later won about a quarter of the vote running as an independent train operator for chairman of the motormen's division. Workers didn't necessarily agree with our entire program, but they backed someone who stood up to management and the bureaucracy.

From 1982 through the late 1990s, I also sold our party newspaper, *The Bulletin* (later the *International Workers Bulletin*), inside transit crew rooms—not just to train crews, but to underpaid car cleaners. Management was furious and posted notices banning literature sales on TA property; someone scrawled "Alan Cherry and Edwin Soto" right beneath the order. Edwin Soto joined the Trotskyist movement as a teenager, became a transit worker in the 1980s and worked in the New York City subway system for more than three decades before retiring in 2020.

After we launched the *World Socialist Web Site* in 1998, we distributed leaflets on broad political and cultural topics, including dozens of copies of David Walsh's review of *Titanic*, which workers read eagerly. It showed them that socialism fought for the cultural and intellectual elevation of the entire working class.

Shop-floor oppression and the fraud of "New Directions"

WSWS: What were daily working conditions like during the 1980s and 1990s?

AC: Operating rules were draconian. Because train schedules depend on crews, management was obsessed with attendance. Calling in sick meant house arrest: Inspectors came to your door, and if you stepped out for medicine or a newspaper, you had to call control out and back in or face discipline.

Harassment extended even to bathroom breaks. After hours of running back and forth on a train, taking a "comfort" break at a terminal required a dispatcher's permission, and workers were routinely written up for using the restroom. At Stillwell Avenue in Brooklyn, supervisors literally stood outside bathrooms with clipboards logging workers' names. The disciplinary system operated on a presumption of guilt, and at hearings, union reps rarely mounted a real defense—I usually had to argue my own cases.

WSWS: In the 1990s, the "New Directions" caucus emerged and won power under Roger Toussaint in 2000. What was its real character?

AC: One of New Directions' main founders, Steve Downs, was in my 1982 conductor training class. He was an ex-radical from the pseudo-left group Solidarity who claimed to be a socialist while operating entirely within trade union reformism.

New Directions was never a genuine rank-and-file movement. It was an opportunist caucus of middle-class radicals and careerists who exploited the anger of younger workers hired in the 1980s and 1990s. It did not "reflect" working-class militancy any more than Bernie Sanders or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez do. Instead, it channeled workers' anger back into the Democratic Party and the capitalist state. Once on the Executive Board, Downs openly endorsed Barack Obama. The fake left keeps insisting the unions can be reformed or pressured, which is precisely how they hold workers back.

The bureaucracy's collusion with the state was blatant during the 1999–2000 contract dispute. Approaching the New Year's Eve 1999 deadline, workers had massive leverage ahead of the Times Square millennial celebrations. Mayor Rudy Giuliani obtained an unlawful court injunction imposing fines of $25,000 per worker on day one, doubling each subsequent day. At a mass meeting, old-guard Local 100 President Willie James—who had endorsed Giuliani—brandished the injunction and declared we could not strike. Most workers recognized that the union leadership colluded with City Hall to get that injunction as an exit ramp to prevent a walkout.

The 2005 strike betrayal and the struggle today

WSWS: What happened during the 2005 transit strike, and how did TWU President Roger Toussaint shut it down?

AC: In December 2005, the MTA demanded major concessions, including a two-tier pension system targeting new hires. At a pre-strike

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mass meeting at the Javits Center, the leadership brought in Reverend Jesse Jackson to pacify the crowd with empty bluster. Afterward, thousands of overflow workers gathered in an anteroom. TWU President Roger Toussaint stepped onto an interior balcony and shouted, “What do we want?” expecting the chant “Contract!” Instead, the crowd roared, “Strike! Strike! Strike!”

Toussaint called the walkout only to contain rank-and-file anger and prepare its betrayal, with no intention of fighting the Taylor Law. The strike was 100 percent effective, shutting down the city for nearly three days in freezing weather. Then, abruptly and without a finalized contract or clear terms, Toussaint ordered everyone back to work. Workers on the picket lines were stunned and bitter. The membership initially voted down the tentative agreement over the 1.5 percent healthcare deduction before it was pushed through in a revote.

The state retaliated ruthlessly under the Taylor Law. Workers were docked six days’ pay, Toussaint served a brief jail term, and the courts suspended automatic dues checkoff. Officers had to collect dues by hand in crew rooms, where many workers refused to pay. To restore automatic dues checkoff—the bureaucracy’s financial lifeblood—Toussaint signed a no-strike pledge. By 2008, John Samuelsen took the presidency after the bureaucracy used dues arrears from the checkoff suspension to disqualify rival candidates. By then, the union had long ceased to be a workers’ organization, functioning instead as an arm of corporate management.

WSWS: Today, transit workers and municipal workers in DC 37 face expired contracts, falling real wages, and deadly conditions, underscored by the recent death of track worker Moet McCollum. What lessons must workers draw?

AC: Moet McCollum’s fatal crushing on the tracks is the direct result of management’s cost-cutting and union complicity. Track safety is simple: Flaggers and track workers should ride the train together, step off at the station, and hold the train until the flagger physically clears the track. Instead, the MTA puts workers on active tracks to maintain schedules. At the press conference afterward, MTA Chairman Janno Lieber called transit workers “a family” but completely evaded a reporter’s direct question about whether flagging rules failed and needed changing.

These attacks on wages and safety are part of a broader ruling class drive to make workers pay for imperialist war—an agenda that requires authoritarian rule, which is why billionaires backed Trump. While Mamdani’s election and the midterm elections showed in a distorted way that workers reject this, defeating it requires an independent working-class political movement that breaks with both corporate parties and expropriates the wealth of the rich to fund living standards, free and safe public transit, housing and healthcare.

Transit workers, teachers, paraprofessionals and city workers need new organizations of struggle, freed from the straitjacket of corporatist union bureaucracy that divide us across job titles and agencies. The Socialist Equality Party calls for building rank-and-file committees in every crew room, depot, shop and yard to fight for what workers need, not what Mamdani, the MTA and the TWU apparatus say they can afford.

Just yesterday, I spoke for an hour with a bus operator who asked how a rank-and-file committee would work. I explained that the union bureaucracy exists to enforce the Taylor Law, divide workers and defend capitalism. A rank-and-file committee unites workers across all divisions, links transit workers with logistics, healthcare and education workers nationally and internationally, and prepares a political general strike to smash the Taylor Law and the capitalist profit system.



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