

The New York transit strike: A new stage in the class struggle

By the *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board and the Socialist Equality Party
21 December 2005

The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party salute the 34,000 transit workers of New York City, whose courage in the face of draconian threats has provided an inspiring example of determination and solidarity to the working class throughout the United States and, indeed, internationally. The strike by transit workers is an event of international significance. Defying massive fines and even the threat of jail, the strike represents a direct challenge to a super-rich Wall Street elite that is accustomed to imposing its economic interests and its will not only on New York City, but on the world.

In no other country is the existence of social class, not to mention class struggle, so vehemently denied as in the United States. But in no other country are the class divisions so deep. And nowhere else is class war practiced with a viciousness that equals that of the American ruling class. It has taken less than 24 hours for the strike of transit workers to expose before the eyes of the world the brutal reality of American society.

The strike exemplifies the unbridgeable class divisions in American society, in which a corrupt and reactionary financial oligarchy utilizes the most brutal methods to smash all resistance to its lust for profits and personal wealth. One has only to look at the cast of characters leading the assault on transit workers to get a sense of the real social issues at stake in this conflict.

First, there is Michael Bloomberg, who spent lavishly out of his vast personal fortune of more than \$5 billion to buy the mayoralty. He had the effrontery to go before cameras Tuesday to denounce bus and subway workers as “selfish,” “thuggish,” “disgraceful” and “shameful.”

Second, there is real estate mogul Peter Kalikow, with a net worth of more than \$1 billion, who is negotiating on behalf of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA).

Third, leading the anti-transit worker hate campaign of the gutter media is Rupert Murdoch, the owner of the *New York Post* and Fox News. His personal fortune is estimated to be approximately \$8 billion.

These individuals pocket in one day more than even the highest paid transit worker takes home in a year.

These are the people demanding that transit workers—whose wages barely cover basic necessities in New York, one of the most expensive cities in the world—sacrifice their wages, pensions and benefits in order to meet the interest payments to rich investors, who augment their fortunes by purchasing high-yield MTA bonds.

The Bloomberg administration and MTA have secured multiple injunctions against the transit workers. Under the provisions of New York state’s anti-labor Taylor Law, each individual worker faces fines of two day’s pay for every day on the picket line. The city, meanwhile, has convinced a judge to impose \$1 million a day in fines against Transport Workers Union Local 100, which represents the bus and subway workers.

The city has also called for fines against individual workers of \$25,000 for the first day on strike, to be doubled for each additional day of the walkout—a sum that would rise to over \$1 million in less than a week and bankrupt the workers and their families far sooner. The MTA has also threatened to fire any workers who participated in the 1980 strike and join their co-workers in the current walkout. There have also been strident calls for the jailing of Local 100 President Roger Toussaint, other union officials, and rank-and-file workers themselves.

The immense international significance of the transit strike is that it has shattered the façade of a monolithic American “national unity” endlessly proclaimed by the government and the media. There exists within the United States a powerful social force that is capable of fighting and resisting the reactionary and inhuman policies of the ruling oligarchy—policies imposed not only within the United States, but also internationally.

In this regard, it is especially significant to note the national, religious and ethnic diversity of the New Yorkers engaged in this struggle. Walking on the picket lines are workers from every part of the world. The solidarity of striking transit workers represents in microcosmic form the emerging unity of the international working class.

This is the first strike by New York’s transit workers in 25 years. The eleven-day walkout of 1980 brought the city and state to the brink of surrender, but was betrayed by the union’s leadership, which accepted a concessions agreement and the imposition of massive fines involving the loss of nearly a month’s pay for every worker.

The betrayal of that struggle set the stage for a wave of

strike-breaking, union-busting and layoffs that was initiated by the Reagan administration in the firing of 11,000 air traffic controllers a year later, and then unleashed throughout basic industry.

These attacks signaled the near elimination of the working class as a visible social force in the US for an entire period, and created the conditions for the piling up of the fortunes of the likes of Bloomberg, Kalikow and Murdoch. Successive administrations, both Democratic and Republican, on the national, state and municipal level, have presided ever since over a vast transfer of wealth from the working class to the financial elite and the upper layers of the privileged middle class. Workers' real wages have stagnated or fallen for decades, while social benefits have been systematically dismantled.

In New York City, the wealthy and the corporations have been largely relieved of the burden of financing a public transportation system upon which their businesses depend, with the cost shifted onto the backs of workers and passengers. The floating of interest-bearing bonds as the principal source of capital funding has turned the labor of bus and subway workers into yet another source of profit linked to financial speculation.

The immense international significance of the current transit strike is that it has brought the American working class forward once again as a powerful social force being propelled into struggle by the relentless drive of corporations and public employers to boost profits by cutting jobs, pensions and medical benefits.

The workers are in a powerful position. The MTA and the ruling establishment are unable to replace 34,000 workers and run the huge transit system with scab labor, as was done against the PATCO air traffic controllers. It cannot outsource public transportation or shift it to a low-wage haven. And the cost of the walkout to the city's businesses is estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars daily. The frenzied ultimatums and threats cannot conceal the weakness of the city's and state's position.

At the same time, the strike has underscored the tremendous crisis of political perspective and leadership within the working class.

The greatest obstacle to the victory of the transit workers comes from their own union leadership. Local 100's parent union, the TWU International, has branded the walkout as illegal and unsanctioned. The union's international president, Michael O'Brien, intervened in the Monday night Local 100 executive board meeting that voted to call the strike. He called on the local to accept the MTA's takeaway offer and refused to authorize the strike, depriving the city's transit workers of the logistical, legal and financial support that is paid for by their own dues. At Tuesday's court

proceedings to impose fines on Local 100, lawyers for the international union intervened to insist that it bore no responsibility for the walkout, because it opposed the strike.

The TWU International's web site has posted a statement calling on Local 100 to end its strike and return to work. Local 100 sources, meanwhile, report that the international union is threatening to place the local in receivership, a measure normally used in cases of gross corruption, where local officers are replaced by staff appointed by the international union. If this action is taken, the union will order workers to abandon the picket lines and add its own penalties to those of the city and state against those who refuse to submit.

Nothing could more graphically demonstrate the way in which the official trade unions have been transformed into instruments for suppressing workers' struggles and blocking any challenge to American capitalism. They have integrated themselves into the Democratic Party, an unswerving defender of the financial oligarchy, while promoting baseless illusions that this party is somehow a "friend of labor."

The current transit strike has once again demonstrated the fraudulent character of such claims. No prominent Democrat has come forward to defend the bus and subway workers against the savage attacks being carried out against them. New York's Senator Hillary Clinton, for example, proclaimed her "neutrality" in this bitter battle, offering her services as a mediator while declaring her support for the Taylor Law, the principal weapon being used to bludgeon the workers into submission.

More starkly than any event in the past twenty years, the present strike by New York City transit workers poses before the entire working class the need to develop a new leadership and a new political strategy to carry forward their struggle, founded on a program that upholds the interests and needs of working people against the profit drive of the financial elite.

Because the transit strike, like every serious social struggle, pits workers against the profit system as a whole, it poses the urgent need for an independent political movement of the working class.

If this strike is to be successful, transit workers must be guided by a perspective that rejects the social, economic and political assumptions of the financial oligarchy and its political parties. The unending demands for reductions in the living standards of workers clearly demonstrate that their interests are incompatible with the requirements of the capitalist profit system.

We call on transit workers and all other sections of working people who agree with this perspective to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and join us in building the Socialist Equality Party.

© World Socialist Web Site

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit: <http://www.wsws.org>
