

New York City transit workers on brink of class confrontation

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New York City transit workers are on the brink of a historic confrontation in which every section of the working class has the most vital interest.

There is an unbridgeable gap between the determination of 34,000 bus and subway workers to defend their wages, pensions and working conditions, and the demands of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to rip up the gains won through generations of struggle.

The MTA's "final offer" includes the use of "broadbanding" to eliminate thousands of jobs, the elimination for new hires of the right to retire at 55 after 25 years' service, wage increases far below the rate of inflation and other givebacks. The bosses have made their intentions clear, not only by threatening the use of the anti-labor Taylor Law, with its draconian penalties for striking, but also by seeking a new injunction that would penalize workers the sum of \$25,000 for the first day off the job, with the fine to double for each additional day on strike.

The leadership of Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, having already postponed strike action for four days, has set a new deadline of 12:01 a.m., Tuesday, December 20. Transit workers must insist that the new deadline be adhered to. They must answer the provocations of the MTA with citywide strike action including every member of the union. But they must, above all, recognize that they face a political attack backed up by the full power of the government. Transit workers must answer this with their own political strategy, including the fight to mobilize the support of millions of fellow workers.

The truth about this struggle must be stated from the outset. Either the transit workers' struggle enlists the active support of other sections of workers in a political counteroffensive against all the attacks on jobs and public services, or it will be isolated and defeated.

The MTA is fully aware of the political issues involved in this contract dispute, including the broad sympathy for the

transit workers among other sections of the working class, employed and unemployed, union and nonunion alike. Hence, the New York City political and media establishment, faithfully representing the interests of the Wall Street financial aristocracy, has launched a campaign of lies and slanders against the allegedly greedy and overpaid bus and subway workers.

The arrogance of billionaires Mayor Michael Bloomberg and MTA chairman Peter Kalikow, backed by their fellow billionaire Rupert Murdoch, whose media empire includes Fox Television and the *New York Post*, knows no bounds, as witnessed by their lectures to the transit workers on the need to tighten their belts.

The ruling elite shamelessly seeks to divert attention from the real class divide in New York. It is not between the lower-paid and the transit workers, who earn in some cases between \$50,000 and \$60,000 annually in one of the most expensive cities in the world, where housing costs routinely eat up more than one third and even one half of workers' incomes. The real divide is between the vast majority of working people and the tiny percentage of rich and super-rich whose spokesman is billionaire Bloomberg.

Republican Governor George Pataki, with an eye on the 2008 contest for the Republican presidential nomination, has clearly signaled to his appointees on the MTA Board his full support for a tough line against the transit workers. The Democrats, who still predominate overwhelmingly on New York's City Council, have uttered a few meaningless words of sympathy for the workers—while supporting the Taylor Law!

Millions sympathize with the transit workers, but the rank and file is fighting with its hands tied. While both big business political parties and the media line up against the workers, Roger Toussaint and the rest of the leadership of TWU Local 100 explicitly reject a political struggle.

Any reliance upon Toussaint to conduct this struggle would be a grievous mistake. The Local 100 president combines the occasional demagogic threat with support for the big business Democratic Party and opposition to the

independent struggle of the working class. Union rallies have been converted into platforms for the rest of the trade union bureaucrats to make empty speeches, while Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton was brought out to declare her “neutrality,” while adding her willingness to try to broker a settlement.

Transit workers are determined to fight back, but they must ensure that what happened to them in the last New York transit strike 25 years ago does not happen again. Toussaint is carrying on where his predecessors left off. In 1980, the workers fought determinedly against the strikebreaking and union-busting demagoguery of Mayor Ed Koch, but were robbed of victory by the betrayal of the union bureaucracy. After 11 days, the bureaucracy agreed to a concessions deal and consciously accepted the imposition of Taylor Law penalties, including the loss of two days’ pay for each day on strike. This savage penalty was used to teach the rank-and-file workers a lesson, and in its aim of intimidation it succeeded for a number of years. Many workers, having lost nearly one month’s pay, were understandably reluctant in subsequent years to consider the weapon of strike action.

The 1980 strike took place three years after the coal miners’ successful defiance of the Taft-Hartley anti-strike law invoked by the administration of President Jimmy Carter. The ruling elite was determined to make the Taylor Law, its New York State version of Taft-Hartley, stick. The 1980 betrayal of the transit workers became the rehearsal for the well-planned destruction of the PATCO air traffic controllers’ union in 1981, which in turn ushered in a period of union-busting, concessions and the elimination of millions of decent jobs. A one-sided class war has been waged against the working class for the past quarter-century, with the active collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy.

The consequence of this ongoing assault on the working class has been the creation of explosive conditions in New York, with a gap between wealth and poverty that has virtually no precedent in American history. The gigantic transfer of wealth from the workers who create it to the handful of corporate parasites and bankers who control the economy has created what amounts to a plutocracy, where working people have no say in their conditions of life and their future.

The Socialist Equality Party and its predecessor organization, the Workers League, know from direct experience the role of the TWU bureaucracy and the need for a political strategy. In 1980, the only member of the Local 100 Executive Board to oppose the betrayal of the strike was the late Ed Winn, a New York City transit worker and Executive Board member from the union’s surface maintenance division. Winn was a member of the Workers

League who went on to be our presidential candidate in 1984 and 1988. In 1980, he courageously raised the need for a political answer to strikebreaking, calling upon his fellow workers to turn out to every section of the working class and fight for a break with the two big business parties.

Today, the issues raised in 1980 are posed even more starkly. Just as PATCO became the trigger for new attacks on airline workers and other sections of basic industry, the current attack on the transit workers is designed to pave the way for the dismantling of hard-won gains for public employees throughout the country.

New generations of transit workers, without direct experience of the ruthless Taylor Law penalties, are determined and defiant in the face of the provocations of the MTA and the Bloomberg and Pataki administrations. This defiance must be linked, however, to a perspective that is based upon the lessons of previous struggles, including the bitter betrayal of 1980.

This means that transit workers must take the political offensive against the lies designed to pit lower-paid workers and the unemployed against them. They must reach out to every section of the working class, independently of the trade union officialdom. They must organize independent strike committees to bring a message of unity and struggle to all sections of working people—to other trade unionists, to the unorganized and unemployed, the immigrant, the students, youth, professionals and small business.

This offensive must be linked above all to a political program—a call for a break with the Democrats. The key to unleashing the strength of the working class is to tell the truth about the capitalist two-party system, to tap the growing anger at the lies and corruption of the big business politicians and the outrageous social inequality and obscene accumulation of wealth.

This can spearhead the fight for a new mass political party of the working class to fight for a socialist program, a program of democratic planning of the economy to fight for social equality, to provide a future for all, not just for the super-rich. The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* will do all in its power to win support for the transit workers’ fight. We urge members of TWU Local 100 to join us to build the leadership for this struggle.



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