

New York transit strikers confront escalating attacks

The World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board
22 December 2005

This article is available as a PDF leaflet to download and distribute

As the New York City transit strike enters its third day, the authorities have sharply escalated attacks aimed at bludgeoning 34,000 bus and subway workers into submission.

After imposing a daily fine of \$1 million against the union, Transport Workers Union Local 100—an amount that will bankrupt the organization within days—New York State Supreme Court Justice Theodore Jones indicated that by Thursday he might impose the astonishing penalty of a \$25,000 fine against each striker, with the amount to be doubled for each additional day on the picket line. This is a measure designed to turn workers and their families into homeless paupers.

The transit workers already face severe sanctions under the state's anti-labor Taylor Law, which makes public employee strikes illegal. The law calls for them to be penalized two days' pay for every day on the picket line.

Judge Jones also ordered Local 100's lawyers to bring the union's president, Roger Toussaint, and other top officials to his courtroom Thursday, warning that it was a "distinct possibility" that he would throw them in jail.

These measures amount to state terror against a significant section of the working class of New York. They are comparable to the tactics employed by police-state regimes to crush opposition.

While the Bush administration and its Democratic allies proclaim it Washington's mission to spread "democracy" around the world, the methods used against the resistance of American workers to the destruction of their rights and living standards demonstrate the hollow reality of US democracy for the broad masses of people.

This strike has been provoked not by the "selfishness" of the workers, as New York's billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg has repeatedly charged, but the arrogance and cold-blooded calculations of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and the corporate and financial interests that stand behind it.

A walkout was nearly averted after the MTA removed from the table its demand to raise the minimum age of retirement to 62. Transit workers, whose life expectancy is significantly reduced by the harsh conditions of the job, viewed this proposal as sentencing many to death before they could collect even what they themselves had contributed to their pensions. They were determined to strike rather than accept it.

According to *New York Times* report Tuesday, the MTA intervened at literally the last minute with a new demand for a radical alteration in the pension plan, one that would force new employees to contribute 6 percent of their pay to their pensions.

The savings to be accrued from this pension change are massively outweighed by the economic impact of the strike which the MTA knew would be the result of its last-minute ultimatum. As the *New York Times* pointed out, the proposed pension change "would apparently save less over the next three years than what the New York City Police Department will spend on extra overtime during the first two days of the strike," not to mention the hundreds of millions of dollars in daily losses to the city's economy. Even over the long term, it would take at least 25 years for projected savings on transit workers' pensions to equal the estimated losses if the strike continues for a week.

On the surface, it would seem reckless and irrational to provoke such a confrontation over this issue. But behind the MTA's hard line is the drive by both public sector and private sector employers to roll back pensions, healthcare and other benefits won by the working class, which are viewed as an intolerable impediment to the drive for profit.

Union concessions on the transit workers' pensions would be used as a precedent to exact similar takeaways from hundreds of thousands of city and state workers throughout New York. Moreover, it would be seen as furthering the interests of the major shareholders of General Motors, Verizon, Hewlett-Packard and other US corporations which are pressing to drastically reduce the pensions and health benefits of their employees.

The MTA and the ruling elite as a whole decided to provoke a strike, indifferent to the enormous hardships that it would mean for millions of people in New York City. They see it as a replay of the type of confrontation precipitated by the Reagan administration with the air traffic controllers in 1981, and for the same purpose: to make an example of a section of the working class so as to carry through far-reaching attacks on the rights and living standards of all workers.

The transit workers are confronting not merely the MTA and the administrations of Governor Pataki and Mayor Bloomberg, but the financial and corporate ruling elite which is headquartered in New York City. The issues over which they are fighting are of vital importance to every section of the working class, and their defeat would spell a new onslaught on the basic rights of workers, union and non-union alike.

This is what the politicians and the media are working feverishly to conceal. Mayor Bloomberg has led this effort, denouncing the transit strikers while shedding crocodile tears for poorly paid workers facing loss of pay and even their jobs because of the strike.

“These are not people who are making \$50,000-\$60,000 a year. These are people making \$10,000, \$20,000, \$30,000 a year, and they’re the ones who are really suffering,” said Bloomberg at a City Hall press conference Wednesday. “What fraud,” he continued, “claiming to be the champion of working families, when the illegal actions they are taking are costing New Yorkers their livelihood.”

The fraud is being perpetrated by the mayor. His propaganda campaign cannot conceal the fact that the transit workers making \$50,000 a year are themselves struggling to survive in a city where housing and other costs have skyrocketed, in large part because of the concentration of multi-millionaires and billionaires like himself. Those making considerably less are the relatives, neighbors and friends of the strikers. They live in the same social world and share the same essential interests and problems, unlike Bloomberg, who used his \$5 billion fortune to buy his way into City Hall.

No such concern for workers losing their livelihood is heard from City Hall when companies lay off workers, shut down factories or transfer their operations to low-wage havens overseas. The suffering that results from the massive tax cuts given to Bloomberg’s fellow oligarchs, resulting in the decimation of social programs for the poor, is likewise a matter of indifference.

The transit workers, despite the immense strength and courage embodied in their strike, are in grave danger precisely because they have been left isolated. Not a single section of the union officialdom in New York City has lifted a finger to defend them. Verbal affirmations of solidarity are worthless in the face of the vicious attacks they are facing.

It is not a matter of a lack of support within the working class. There is no question that if a demonstration were called to back the transit workers there would be an outpouring of solidarity. Many workers recognize that the attacks on transit workers, if successful, will have a profound impact on the workers’ movement in the city and throughout the country.

There is broad sympathy in the middle class as well. It is significant that on Tuesday the *New York Times* letters section included not a single denunciation of the strikers, but rather repeated statements of sympathy for the workers and hostility to Bloomberg and the MTA.

The most despicable manifestation of the trade union bureaucracy’s abandonment of the transit workers comes from the organization that purports to represent them, and which is funded by the dues that are deducted from their paychecks. The Transport Workers Union, the parent organization of TWU Local 100, has openly sided with management and the city and state governments that provoked the strike and are now seeking to crush the workers. The union has stabbed its own members in the back.

On Monday, lawyers for the TWU international went into court, not to defend the workers against the anti-labor attacks, but to solidarize themselves with the city in declaring the walkout illegal

and demanding that the union’s members capitulate.

The TWU’s international president, Michael O’Brien issued a statement Tuesday instructing workers to “cease any and all strike or strike-related activities and... report to work at their regularly assigned work hours and work locations.”

O’Brien’s statement was immediately seized upon by those seeking to break the strike. “All the transit workers have to do is listen to their international (union) that’s urged them to go back to work,” said Mayor Bloomberg. “They should go back to work. Nobody’s above the law, and everyone should obey the law.”

The TWU is an organization of bureaucrats, not of workers. It defends the interests not of bus and subway workers, but of a privileged upper-middle-class layer. O’Brien himself makes more than \$225,000, at least four times the salary of the average transit employee.

O’Brien and the TWU, like the labor bureaucracy as a whole, are responding to the demands of the ruling establishment to suppress the resistance of New York City’s transit workers. For the past quarter of a century, the union bureaucracy has systematically isolated, betrayed and helped crush every serious social struggle in the US. It has played an indispensable role in facilitating the massive transfer of wealth from working people to the thin layer of multi-millionaires and billionaires at the top. In the New York transit strike, it sees the danger of all these years of work being undone, and a new wave of class struggle erupting in America.

This is why it is vital that New York City transit workers assimilate the lessons of the last transit strike, in 1980. After 11 days, the workers had brought the state and city to the brink of capitulation. It was the bureaucracy of their union, then headed by John Lawe, which snatched defeat from the jaws of victory, forcing strikers back to work with a concessions contract and Taylor Law penalties amounting to nearly a month’s pay. The bureaucracy welcomed these penalties as a means of taming the militancy of the rank-and-file.

No such betrayal must be allowed today. Workers must organize their own independent strike committees and turn out to the broadest sections of the working class to mobilize support. Working people in New York City and nationally must come to the defense of the strike through solidarity actions.

Above all, the transit strike poses the necessity of a new political strategy, based on the fight for the political independence of the working class. This means the building of a new mass party, armed with a socialist program that starts from the needs of working people and the struggle for socialist equality, rather than the profit interests of the financial elite.

We urge transit workers and all those who agree with this perspective to join and help build the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact