Strikebreaking threats as contract deadline nears

Transit dispute exposes New York City's class divide

Alan Whyte
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As a December 16 contract deadline nears, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and the administration of billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Blooomberg—backed by the major media—have launched an all-out campaign aimed at intimidating New York City's nearly 34,000 bus and subway workers. Fines and even jailings are threatened if these workers dare to walk off their jobs against management's demands for wholesale givebacks.

The contract dispute between the transit authority and Transport Workers Union Local 100 has once again exposed the immense class divide that exists in New York City. Workers who risk—and all too frequently lose—their lives keeping the trains and buses that carry some 7 million passengers running are being offered a wage increase that does not even keep up with inflation. Even this has been put on the table only in exchange for sweeping concessions entailing job cuts, heavier workloads and workers being forced to continue working until they die or their health is broken.

As always, leading the pack in the vilification and threats against the TWU is Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post*, which reflects the right-wing views of the Bush administration and predominant sections within New York City's financial elite. The newspaper, which has its own long record of union-busting, calls for the destruction of the union if a strike is called.

"Most riders would *kill* for the wages, benefits and retirement plan *already* enjoyed by TWU members," the *Post* editorialized Friday. The MTA's contract offer, the newspaper added, "is pretty reflective of the economic circumstances of an overwhelming majority of riders."

But not everyone in New York shares these "circumstances." While transit workers—who on average make approximately $40,000 a year—are being offered a two-year contract with a miserable 3 percent raise the first year and 2 percent in the second—contingent on reducing use of sick leave—what is on offer for Wall Street's bankers and traders is quite a different story.

Bonuses, which are paid out around the same time as the TWU's contract expires, are expected to increase by 20 percent over last year, with $5 million payouts not being that unusual. The total bonus pool reportedly includes some $18 billion.

Vast resources are lavished on the investment bankers who trade in the bonds sold by the MTA to finance subway and bus operations. Those who run the buses and trains, meanwhile, are told that they must sacrifice their living standards, benefits and working conditions in order to pay off the interest that flows into Wall Street's pockets.

This is the system of financial parasitism and social inequality that is defended by all those in the government and media who are threatening transit workers and demanding the ruthless crushing of any strike.

The MTA is vowing to impose severe financial penalties on transit workers if they walk out. Under the state's Taylor Law, passed after the 1966 transit strike, workers would lose two days pay for every day on strike. This penalty was imposed after the last strike in 1980. In addition to individual fines, the union had to pay $1 million.

In December 1999, then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani obtained a court injunction that threatened transit workers with much bigger financial penalties not only for striking, but for even talking about a walkout. The fine would have amounted to $25,000 a day to be doubled every succeeding day off the job. In December 2002, Mayor Bloomberg was in the process of obtaining a similar injunction that became unnecessary when the union and management reached a settlement hours past the contract expiration.

TWU Local 100 has filed a lawsuit against the city in Federal District Court in an attempt to prevent Bloomberg from obtaining a similar injunction, arguing that a court ban

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on advocating or taking a vote on a strike represents a gross violation of free speech rights. The city is arguing that the union's lawsuit is itself a violation of the 2002 injunction.

The city, meanwhile, has unveiled its contingency plans for a possible strike, which includes banning cars with only one person in the vehicle, creating car pools, allowing yellow cabs to pick up more than one paying fare, restricting truck deliveries and increasing service on the commuter trains that carry passengers in and out of New York.

In response, the Taxi Workers Alliance, which represents thousands of predominantly South Asian cabbies, said its members would refuse to pick up extra passengers and could strike in solidarity with a transit walkout.

Major banks and businesses have also announced contingency plans involving use of private buses and vans and booking hotel rooms in the city.

These threats are being made in order to impose huge concessions on the workers. In contract talks this week, the MTA demanded that new hires be forced to work until they are 62 instead of 55, which is the current minimum age of retirement for most employees after 25 years of service. The agency is also seeking cutbacks in sick benefits, such as requiring that employees pay 2 percent of their earnings towards health premiums (they currently contribute nothing), the reduction of sick leave, and higher co-payments for prescription drugs and office visits.

The authority is determined to consolidate about 12 job titles, which would involve increased work for many employees. Management's principal goal in this regard is to impose one-person train operation, a program known as OPTO that has been met with fierce resistance from transit workers. As a stepping stone toward eliminating the current two-person crews, the agency is proposing that conductors, instead of performing their normal duties of opening and closing the doors in stations and making announcements, be required to roam through the train, as train operators perform both jobs.

The union leaders are complaining that the agency has already spent a $1 billion surplus that should have been used to help pay for the contract. The MTA has countered that this surplus was temporary, and that the agency owes more than $20 billion. These debts are real, the product of a protracted policy of slashing government subsidies to mass transit, cutting taxes on the rich, and relying on revenues and the sale of bonds to meet operating expenses.

The city's political establishment, backed by the banks and corporations, insists that the full weight of these debts be placed on the backs of transit workers and bus and subway riders through tens of millions of dollars in concessions and, undoubtedly, more fare hikes. There is never talk, however, of sacrifice by the wealthy investors who earn tax-free interest on these bonds.

Transit workers are in no mood to accept more givebacks. About 40 percent of the membership voted to reject the last settlement negotiated by Local 100 President Roger Toussaint.

For the most part, Local 100 leaders have said that they will not accede to the MTA's productivity demands. However, according to a December 3 report in the *New York Times*, "Mr. Toussaint said he would consider management's proposals to consolidate or merge jobs."

It has been 25 years since the last transit strike, when workers shut down the system for 11 days. In that quarter of a century, workers in New York City and across the US have seen their incomes steadily eroded along with the loss of millions of decent-paying jobs, the destruction of social benefits and an assault on basic democratic rights. These attacks have created the conditions for the staggering growth of social inequality as vast wealth has been transferred into the bank accounts of the top 1 percent.

The unions have proven incapable of combating these attacks. Rather, under the control of an opportunist bureaucracy subservient to the Democratic Party and the profit system, they have collaborated in the imposition of an unending series of concessions.

There is no question that a transit workers' strike, demonstrating the power of the working class to defy the dictates of Wall Street, would win powerful support in New York City and across the country. A serious struggle to defend living standards and reverse the attacks of the past 25 years, however, means more than militant strike action.

It above all requires a political struggle to mobilize working people as a whole in opposition to the profit system. This means a break with the Democratic Party and the building of an independent political party of the working class fighting to reorganize society to meet human needs, rather than the accumulation of wealth by a financial elite.

Only such a party will fight to provide full funding for mass transit by repudiating the bond debts and bringing the immense resources of the finance houses and banks that have profited off these debts under public ownership.

That is the perspective for which the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party are fighting. We urge all transit workers to seriously consider and discuss it in preparation for the coming struggles.

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