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By a WSWS reporting team
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“Teachers, autoworkers, everybody in this country, should go on strike”

New York City bus and subway workers speak out against concession demands

Several thousand New York City transit workers rallied last week to oppose demands by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), which would eviscerate the basic rights and living standards of the 40,000 workers in the country’s largest bus and subway system. Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, which has kept workers on the job for six months without a new contract, called the rally to cover up its own collusion with the city’s austerity agenda.

The MTA is seeking to reproduce the conditions that are prevalent for so-called gig economy workers through the introduction of part-timers, outsourcing work to cheap labor contractors and a reduction of overtime pay. The MTA is demanding the doubling of workers’ contributions for healthcare—from 2 to 4 percent—while offering a below-inflation raise of 2 percent in one of the world’s most expensive cities.



A delegation of transit workers at October 30 rally

At the same time, the proposed contract attacks seniority rights and would give the MTA the unilateral right to impose work-rule changes and shift work assignments if the average employee availability does not increase by a total of three days per worker throughout the system.

In 2005, transit workers defied the state's anti-public-employee strike laws and conducted a three-day walkout, which won popular support from millions of workers who struggle to pay rent and other bills in a city that is home to 78 billionaires, the most in the world. But the TWU and other public employee unions isolated the strike and signed an agreement that rolled back wages and working conditions. Faced with the threat of massive fines and the loss of automatic dues deduction, the TWU had not even hinted at the possibility of a strike until last week's rally.

Instead, the TWU has sought to wear down workers in order to push through a contract with unprecedented givebacks without an explosion by the rank and file. For the first time ever, it did not call a rally before the contract expired on May 15 and then kept workers in the dark for three months before even posting the MTA's draconian demands on its website.

At the rally, the union speakers blustered about how unjust the MTA is and how tough the TWU is. There were numerous references to shutting the city down with a strike, an act which the union is deathly afraid of because of the potential of it becoming the catalyst for

strikes and mass demonstrations by city workers and other struggling workers against social inequality and the two big business parties that enforce it.

Several union bureaucrats and local Democratic Party politicians condemned MTA Chairman Patrick Foye and suggested that another MTA board member might be preferable to head the agency. Every union official concealed the fact that Foye was selected by Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, praised by the union as a champion of labor.

Jumaane Williams, the city's Public Advocate and a self-proclaimed "democratic socialist," briefly mentioned that Cuomo was head of the MTA but did not mention that he and Cuomo were both Democrats and that his party has been responsible for years of austerity measures aimed at working people.



Tremaine Coates and Jamal Kerse

Nor did Williams mention that the TWU has been aggressively supporting the governor for years and had donated more than \$275,000 of workers' dues money for Cuomo's election campaigns. Last March, the former head of Local 100 and now president of the national TWU, John Samuelsen, attended a \$20,000-a-plate fundraiser for Cuomo and told *New York Times* reporters that "the governor has been the best governor for the trade union movement ever."

Cuomo has been leading the vilification of transit workers by calling them overtime cheats and criminals in order to justify the MTA's demands for concessions. Democrats like

Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio have also overseen the decaying and dangerous transit infrastructure, endless fare hikes and police-state measure in the subway. Only a few days after the transit workers' rally, mass protests broke out in Brooklyn against the violence and armed intimidation of alleged fare-beaters, mostly working-class youth, by the New York Police Department.

Several workers at the rally spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about working conditions and the need for the unity of workers against concessions. Floyd, an MTA electrician for 32 years, denounced the MTA's contract demands, saying, "It stinks. They ask for so much and don't give anything. Foye is a multimillionaire. The government put him there. He doesn't care about you or me.

"Electrical work is no joke," he said. "People have gotten hurt. We don't get the respect we need. If we have to go on strike, we should."

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A train car equipment mechanic and inspector for three years said, "They want you to do more on top of what you already have to do. Then you cannot finish the work you have to do for the day, but they want you to be more productive."

Tremaine, who has been a track worker for a year and a half, said, "Fixing the tracks we breathe in dust and fumes. There are rat feces, garbage, people using platforms as bathrooms, mold, and all kinds of stuff. People who have been around longer than me are dealing with a lot of health issues. I don't want that to happen to me. We have to fight for a better situation."

Jamal, who has been repairing tracks for 18 years, said, "We feel like we're not respected. The pay sucks. They try to make it out like we get paid a lot, but the cost of living in New York is crazy. There's no cost-of-living adjustment in our contract. The only thing that helped us get by was the overtime, but they took that away.

"MTA has three parts: New York City Transit, Long Island Railroad and Metro North. They try to separate us from each other, but we have to be united." He said the union had backed Cuomo for governor but the Democratic politicians "turned around and stabbed us in the back."

Another transit worker, Drew, said, "I don't think a lot of people realize how dangerous working in transit is. Some of us are killing ourselves. There are a lot of people who don't survive much past retirement."

Another worker added, “We have no choice but to fight back. Pensions are being removed and other cuts are coming. There are cuts to our wages, cuts to our healthcare. These CEOs and rich people are getting richer while working people are feeling the brunt of it.

“I agree with a general strike. I think everyone in this country, teachers, autoworkers, everybody, should go on strike. What is happening to us is happening to workers everywhere.”

A track worker said, “We work in very hazardous conditions. When we go out on the tracks, we are told to wear earplugs to protect our hearing. But we need to hear the trains when they honk to get out of the way; some of the trains use diesels engines and the gas it emits harms our lungs.”

Adrian, a bus operator for five years, addressed the broader issues, saying, “Capitalism is only meant to work in the short run, not in the long run. Oil is polluting the planet. In the 21st century, we should not have any homeless people. Things cannot remain the same.”

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