

## LIRR & NYC Transit Workers: Fight Together for Real Gains!

For three days, 3,500 Long Island Rail Road workers went on strike against the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), shutting down the nation's largest commuter rail system. Democratic governor Kathy Hochul and MTA management tried to bully the workers and smash the strike. They did not succeed, and the bosses' most vicious giveback demands were beaten back.

The LIRR strike showed the enormous potential power of labor, and tens of thousands of commuter rail, subway and bus workers saw this firsthand. However, the strike's negotiated outcome was at best a stalemate. Notably, its 4.5 percent fourth-year pay raise doesn't even keep up with inflation. LIRR union leaders could have held out for much more. Instead, they wasted a unique opportunity to win real gains.

The strikers were sent back to work without being told any of the settlement's details. Union leaders should have organized an informed discussion and vote on the deal before ending the strike! Even now that voting on the deal has begun, many workers tell us that they still don't know its terms.

This alone is reason to question the sentiment to approve the pact. The bosses are entirely capable of pulling a fast one in the fine print. But there is more. The glaring disparity between the power of the strike and the agreement's sub-inflationary wage hikes is strong evidence that far better could be won if LIRR workers were to reject the deal and start organizing a broader fight for substantial improvements.

This perspective entails more struggle, but the payoff could actually be getting some needs met. The main thing required would be for the recent strikers to link up with both their coworkers who were not called out, such as the conductors whose contract expires in August, as well as the 38,000-strong MTA subway and bus workers, whose contract expired at the strike's outset. Now is the time to act because the proposed LIRR contract will expire soon,

in August 2027, when circumstances might not be so favorable. Union leaders will not wage this fight. They are too wedded to the Railway Labor Act's rigged system of federal mediation. With so much at stake and so many union members struggling to make ends meet in one of the country's most expensive areas, the membership's taking the initiative could have a real galvanizing effect. We suggest the following to get the ball rolling:

- Fight together until every affected union has won *real wage gains* with full COLA inflation protection and *no givebacks*, period.
- Demand *full parity* at the highest levels for all the MTA's commuter rail, subway and bus workers to bridge divisions between, e.g., subway train operators and LIRR engineers and raise everyone up.
- Organize *joint union meetings and rallies* of all bargaining units to promote this fight. All MTA workers, from LIRR and Metro-North to NYC transit, should have a common contract expiration date, with an eye toward merging into one industrial union to maximize their fighting strength.
- Transparent negotiations, no backroom deals, full disclosure to the membership and elected bargaining committees with rank-and-file workers at the table.
- No trust in either Democratic or Republican politicians. Demand labor's unconditional *right to strike* and oppose the Railway Labor Act (RLA) and Taylor Law mechanisms for strikebreaking and union-busting.

The MTA bosses provoked the strike by lowballing wages and demanding a big increase in healthcare costs for new hires. They have hard-lined it against the LIRR unions in order to avoid setting a higher wage pattern for the far larger NYC transit workforce. The final Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) report

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said so explicitly, and the MTA's hated chief negotiator, Gary Dellaverson, let that cat out of the bag at a press conference. Another strange dynamic was the Democratic governor's complaint that Trump had egged on the industrial conflict in order to derail her re-election bid. While that would not be out of character for Trump, he is no more a friend of labor than the Democrats. After all, the PEB recommendations were insufficient all along, and federal mediators got the strike called off.

The whole course of the LIRR contract battle proves that the fates of all unionized workers at the MTA are intertwined. The Transit Workers for a Fighting Union (TWFU), a militant caucus within Transport Workers Union Local 100, pointed to the problem in a May 16 leaflet: "So, we are looking at two huge labor struggles—one to win the LIRR strike, another to get a decent contract for TWU Local 100—that are needlessly isolated from one another." And they provided an answer that retains its full force: All MTA workers out together.

## How to Overcome Divisions

The bosses are masters at divide-and-rule, always looking for ways to pit workers against one another to prevent them from uniting in struggle: white vs. black, native-born vs. immigrant, male vs. female, etc. Every union is weakened if not paralyzed when these divisions are not combated. This includes divisions between different crafts, which keep powerful industrial unions from forming.

At LIRR, workers are divided into at least nine craft unions. This setup is mandated by the RLA and enforced by the narrow-minded union bureaucrats, who derive privileges from maintaining their own little fiefdoms. During the strike, the locomotive engineers and conductors, who work side by side, were not out together. They are in separate unions with different contract expiration dates. This is a gift to MTA management that can be countered only by taking every opportunity to organize struggle across craft lines.

Another division to overcome is that between the MTA's commuter rail workers and its subway and bus workers concentrated in the five boroughs. Because NYC transit workers are predominantly black, Latino and immigrant, the bosses have gotten away with giving them worse pay and working conditions than their LIRR counterparts, who service the largely white suburbs. This situation is designed to breed resentment and deepen racial/ethnic polarizations, which undercut the position of all workers.

For example, Local 100 train operators and conductors have grumbled for decades that they're doing the same work as LIRR crews, only in much worse conditions, with more passengers and more discipline, yet for substantially less pay. During the strike, Hochul and MTA chief Lieber regularly dumped on LIRR workers for supposedly being overpaid. If the rail unions were to take up the fight for full parity in pay, protections and benefits for NYC transit workers, it would go a long way toward breaking down any mistrust and solidifying ready allies in struggle. That anti-worker slander would never stick again, and all MTA workers would end up with a stronger hand to play against the bosses. In a similar vein, to stop the bosses from driving a wedge between workers and the riding public, the unions should champion free mass transit.

In contrast to the LIRR craft unions, TWU Local 100 was born as and remains an industrial union with every job title on its roster. But it too is weakened by the union bureaucracy's boss-friendly program of keeping different titles and groups divided. For example, train crews and bus drivers are kept separate from maintenance workers; there needlessly are three separate union bus

divisions; and train operators and conductors always attend separate union meetings. One thing both the MTA and Local 100 officials worry about is that transit workers will get together, get angry, get organized and feel their social power. Local 100 president John Chiarello issued just one three-word statement during the LIRR strike: "We support them." True to form, he did absolutely nothing to mobilize his membership to help the strike win.

## Tackling the Taylor Law

Hochul and the MTA's drive to force LIRR workers to eat concessions makes crystal clear that they will not be going easy on Local 100. Even NYC's phony "socialist" Mayor Mamdani couldn't bring himself to give lip service to solidarizing with the LIRR strikers. The best he could muster was to call for a "fair deal," while advising Long Island commuters to use scab buses. It took strike action to turn back the bosses' attacks at the LIRR.

Every thoughtful worker knows that without the ability to strike you have no real leverage to win your demands. The Taylor Law bans public employee strikes. But when that doesn't stop a strike from occurring, it mandates heavy fines for both striking workers and their unions. There needs to be serious discussion on how to beat back this slave-labor law. These discussions should be happening on the shop floors, in the lunch rooms, on social media, in union division meetings and in real mass meetings where transit workers have the right to raise, discuss and vote on motions that guide Local 100's contract and other struggles forward.

To translate these discussions into action, transit workers must also address the question of leadership. Right now, the Local 100 tops are simply begging for crumbs. To turn this around, TWFU and other rank-and-file groups have launched a united front called Transit Workers for a Just Contract that has popularized the "3x\$5" demand (three annual \$5 an hour wage hikes). This is a good start. Militants must step up who recognize the unions cannot just settle. Without strikes, there would be neither unions nor elementary gains like the eight-hour day, healthcare, pensions, etc.

Local 100 needs leaders who are committed to uniting all workers at the MTA and beyond. In addition to the LIRR, transit workers should be reaching out to other key sectors of NYC labor, such as AFSCME DC 37's hundreds of sewage treatment workers, whose contract expires in October, and its 90,000 city workers, whose contract expires in November. Likewise, TWUers should link up with 1199SEIU's huge membership at the private hospitals, whose contract expires in September. An effort should also be made to draw in NYC's working-class communities, where public housing and basic services are under attack.

The surest way to defeat the Taylor Law is to establish a fighting alliance of several key public employee unions, such as transit, sanitation, teachers and hospital workers. All labor must assert its right to strike and beat back any government attempts to impose fines or jail sentences. The Taylor Law and court injunctions can be turned into scraps of paper. The tremendous social power of unions standing together against the bosses is what counts, not the paper laws designed to keep workers down. ■

