

## New York City transit workers need our support Their fight is our fight

By Jen Roesch  
and Alan Maass

**T**RANSIT WORKERS in New York City are on an all-out strike for the first time in 25 years against the combined wrath of the city's economic, political and media establishment.

It's a battle that has already reverberated across the U.S. as the 33,000 men and women who keep New York's trains and buses rolling draw a line in the sand for all workers against the relentless attacks of employers on wages, benefits and working conditions.

Following marathon negotiations, leaders of Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 announced in the early morning hours of Tuesday that the union had rejected the city's "final" offer and was on strike effective immediately.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), a state agency that runs the city's bus and subway system, immediately went to court, and a judge imposed fines of \$1 million a day against the TWU.

A transit strike is illegal under New York's Taylor Law, which prohibits walkouts by public-sector workers.

Under the law, individual transit workers could be fined the equivalent of two days' pay for every day on strike.

The intent of these mammoth penalties—a throwback to the ju-

dicial union-busting of the 19th century—is obvious: to stop workers from standing up for their rights and defending their union.

The MTA wants to make an example out of transit workers—and if they get away with it, employers everywhere will be emboldened to demand even more concessions.

**B**UT TWU members were walking proud on the picket line on the first morning of the strike.

"Sometimes you have to fight and sacrifice," said a picketer at a transit facility on 207th Street. "We didn't want to strike, but it's the only thing they listen to."

**"Last night, I wasn't sure I wanted to strike. But today, being out here, I feel good, like a human being, seeing all the support we're getting. I know we're doing the right thing, and that we need to stand up and fight."**

Much of the discussion on the picket line is about the MTA's demand for concessions on pensions and health care.

Despite the fact that the MTA accumulated a \$1 billion surplus this past year, management wants to impose a two-tier pension sys-

tem that would require new workers to contribute 6 percent to their plans in their first 10 years of work—and to shift more of the burden of health care costs onto workers.

The anti-strike media claim this is perfectly reasonable.

But concessions would begin the process of eroding pensions and benefits for transit workers—and in the context of an economy where employers are increasingly abandoning both.

On wages, the MTA's final offer is an average annual increase of just over 3.5 percent for the next three years—which is no increase at all once inflation is accounted for.

And this is in New York, one of the most expensive cities in the country.

"They're calling us greedy," said a striker who commutes to

work from New Jersey. "I can't even afford to live in New York."

Beyond this, union members are bitter about rotten working conditions and management's arrogant and repressive attitude in the workplace.

"We get no respect," explained a bus operator at a picket line on 147th Street in Harlem. "They make policies we can't keep up with."

The driver, who has 16 years on the job, explained that part of the effect of management's attack on pensions will be to boost the age at which TWU members can retire—which means forcing workers to stay longer at strenuous jobs.

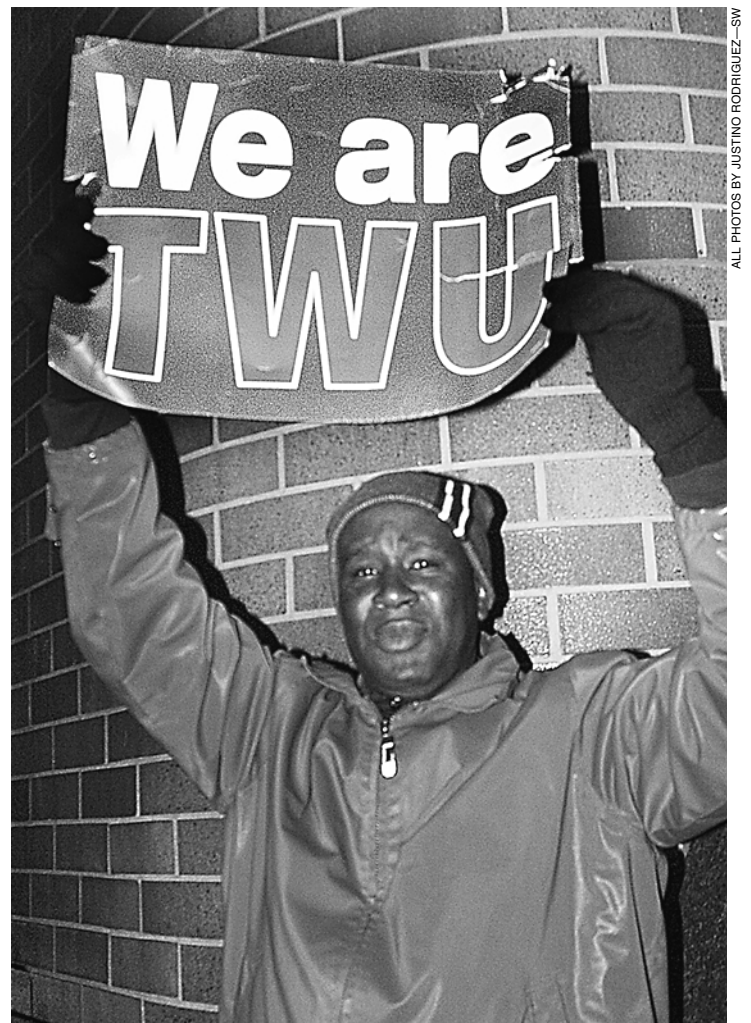
"They want to break us down—physically and mentally—before we retire," he said.

The stakes in this fight are high. TWU members know it, and so do the many people who found ways to show their support on the first day of the strike.

"I'll be honest with you—last night, I wasn't sure I wanted to strike," said a bus driver from the Manhattanville depot.

"But today, being out here, I feel good, like a human being, seeing all the support we're getting. I know we're doing the right thing, and that we need to stand up and fight."

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### What you can do

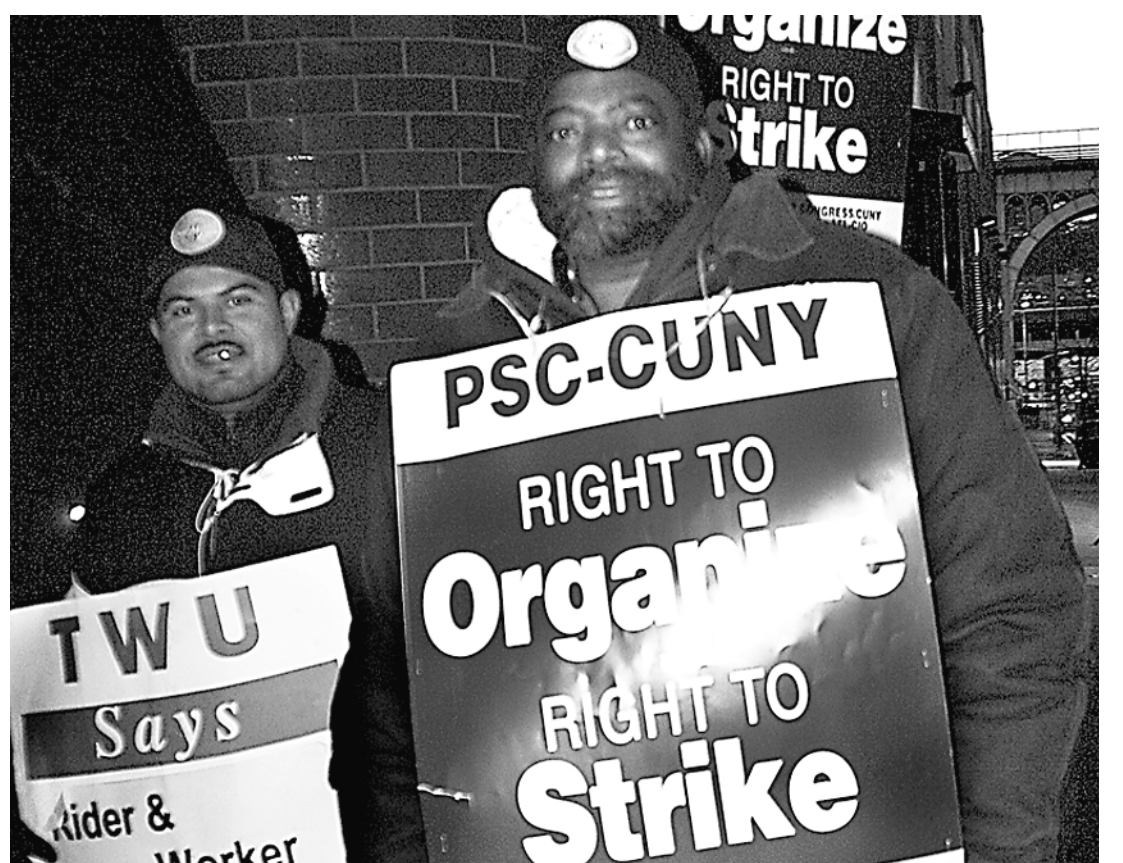
■ Collect donations for the TWU Local 100 Strike Fund. Checks can be sent to: TWU Local 100 Strike Fund, 80 West End Ave., New York, NY 10023.

■ Organize a delegation to visit a picket line near you. See [www.twulocal100.org](http://www.twulocal100.org) for picket locations.

■ Pass resolutions in your union in support of the transit workers and opposing the use of the Taylor Law.

■ Send e-mails in support of the transit workers to: Mayor Bloomberg (<http://www.nyc.gov/html/mail/html/mayor.html>), Gov. Pataki (<http://161.11.3.75/govemail>) and the MTA ([http://mta-nyc.custhelp.com/cgi-bin/mta\\_nyc.cfg/php/enduser/ask.php](http://mta-nyc.custhelp.com/cgi-bin/mta_nyc.cfg/php/enduser/ask.php)).

■ The *New York Daily News* is attacking the transit workers. Call (212-210-2100) or e-mail ([news@edit.nydailynews.com](mailto:news@edit.nydailynews.com)) the *Daily News* to let them know that you stand behind the strikers and oppose their anti-union campaign.



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# Their fight is our fight

**THE MTA, the city and state governments, and the business elite are united against the transit workers.**

A raving *New York Daily News* editorial—headlined “Stop the strike dead in its tracks”—demanded that the “full weight of the law must swiftly be brought to bear on the Transport Workers Union.”

The editorial urged state and city officials to get a judge to “jail [transit union leader Roger] Toussaint and his bull-headed lieutenants,” and impose fines “large enough to bankrupt the union within days.”

New York’s billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg denounced the “cowardly attempt by Roger Toussaint and the TWU to bring the city to its knees to create leverage for their own bargaining position.”

To show that he was with the “people,” Bloomberg—trailed by an entourage of bodyguards, aides and reporters—walked across the Brooklyn Bridge into Manhattan along with thousands of people heading to work.

One problem with the photo op—Bloomberg doesn’t live in Brooklyn.

He must have been driven there by limo so he could walk back across the bridge at rush hour.

Countering the rhetoric of the politicians, workers say that their living standards are being squeezed even harder, while the city and state give away more tax breaks to the corporations and cater to the super-rich.

“I saw a very interesting clip today on CNN,” said one striking train operator. “They were giving an overview of the state of the strike, and in the next sound bite, they had something about Alan Greenspan and the Federal Reserve, and how they were watching the strike, and if we came away with too large a wage increase.”

“It sank in that the transit authority and others in big business have to keep the workforce at a particular level, so that there will

always be a two-tier system in place in America. They’re saying: We have to do this.”

At a picket line on 168th and Broadway in Harlem, another striker pointed out that the MTA “is sitting on a billion dollars.

“All they care about is lining their own pockets—this system runs on profit. They won’t give up anything. If we want crumbs, we have to fight for them.”

Though you wouldn’t know it from the mainstream media coverage, there is widespread public sympathy for the transit workers.

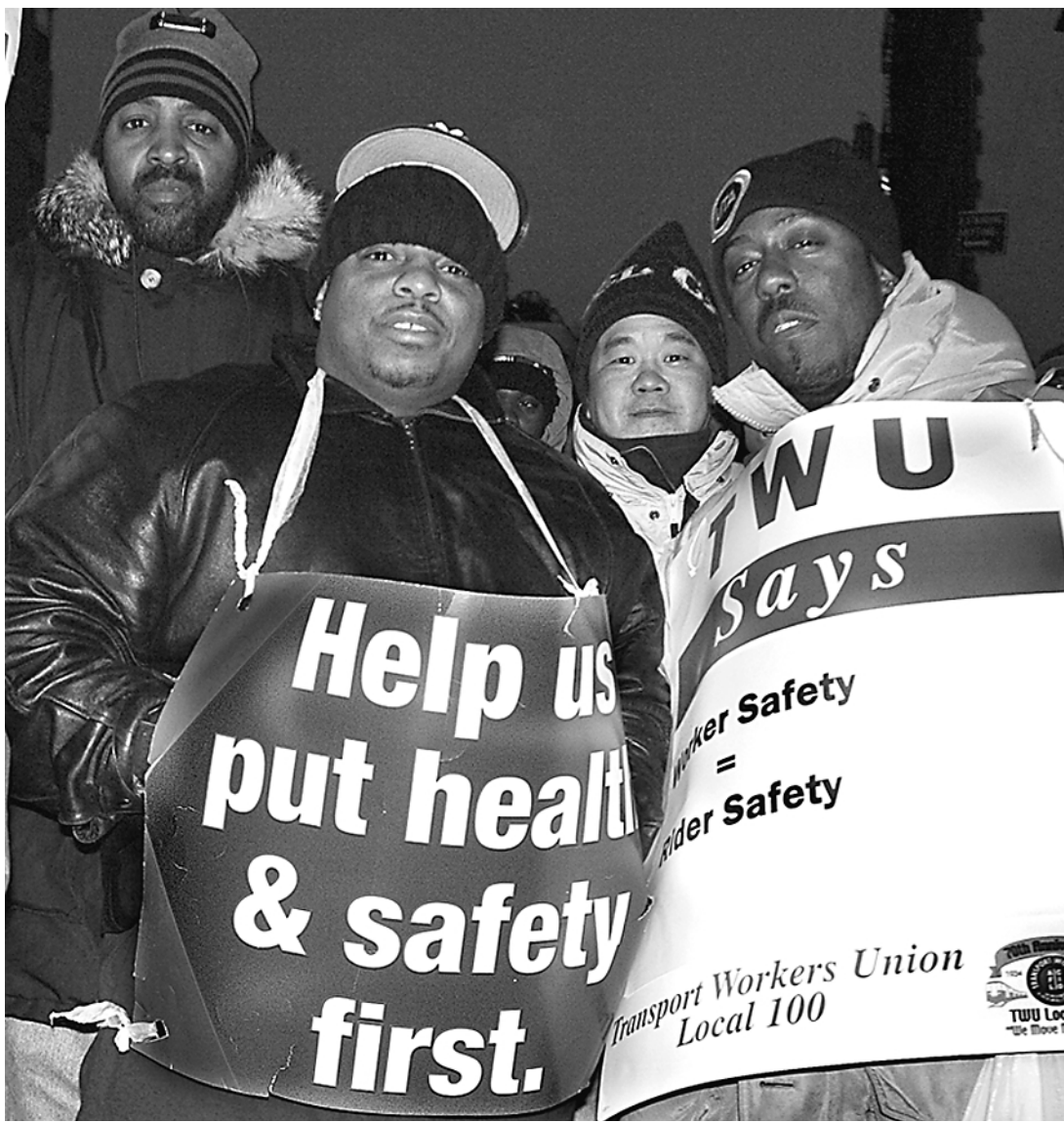
Picket lines across the city were met with enthusiastic honks and greetings from passersby.

At the train yard at 207th Street, teachers and students from a nearby elementary school marched up to the picket line, chanting, “TWU, we love you!”

Public-sector workers especially recognize the importance of the transit workers’ fight. One union after another has accepted concessions in the face of demands from Bloomberg and the city.

A labor rally on Monday brought together thousands of union members and supporters in support of the transit workers.

Speakers representing the whole New York labor movement, plus civil rights organizations and other struggles, rightly put the fight in the context of a broader



working-class struggle.

The TWU’s Toussaint addressed the issue of the Taylor Law, recalling the defiance of the 1960s civil rights movement in the face of racist laws.

“If Rosa Parks had obeyed the law, many of us who drive the buses today would still be sitting in the back of the bus,” he said.

Toussaint’s words ring particularly true in a union that is now predominantly people of color, and where complaints of management abuse, racism and “plantation justice” at work are widespread.

The media’s bitter denunciation of the strike and obsession with interviewing disgruntled commuters was in contrast to the situation at any picket line, where shows of support buoyed the spirit of strikers.

New York itself felt different—like a city where working people had found their voice and were speaking out against the assault on their living standards.

“My father was in the 1980 strike,” said a subway motorman. “He fought for what I have now. I need to fight for my children.”

**THE STRIKE grabbed headlines across the country for an obvious reason—New York is the nerve center of American capitalism, and transit workers have incredible power.**

The city is more dependent on mass transit than probably any other in the country—TWU members move more than 7 million people each day.

Bloomberg’s claim that the city will lose \$400 million a day due to the strike is an absurd overestimate, but the economic impact is real.

The media outbursts complain about Toussaint—for being “bull-headed,” in the words of the *Daily News*.

But many rank-and-file activists in the TWU are critical of the former union dissident for failing to make greater efforts to prepare for a strike or mobilize resistance.

Toussaint won the Local 100 presidency because of discontent after his predecessor, Willie James, folded on strike threats during a contract battle in 1999.

But Toussaint himself accepted a deal in 2002 that many members think was a sellout—and he has since turned the New Directions organization that brought him to power into his personal vehicle.

It’s clear that Toussaint hoped to avoid a strike this time around, too.

But he faced a combination of significant pressure from within the union for a fight, and an MTA that was determined to wrest concessions on pensions. When the MTA’s “final” offer turned out to be so bad, he had to draw a line—and now the fight is on.

The TWU is taking a strong stand against concessions that have become a pattern for labor over the last 25 years—which is why the strike is so important for the embattled union movement as a whole.

After years in which unions accepted one wave of givebacks after another—most recently, wage cuts and dumping of pensions in the airline industry—one union has drawn a line.

At the same time, the MTA and the city are determined to break the back of this strike.

Stopping their anti-union attack will depend on translating the sentiment of support for strikers into concrete solidarity.

The TWU has put on display for millions of people the power that organized labor can have.

“We’re out here for everybody, not just us,” said one bus operator.

“This isn’t just about wage increases,” another striker added. “We’ve been treated with no dignity. It’s about securing pensions and health benefits. It’s about our future.”

The TWU strike is a fight for all of us—with the potential of setting a fighting example for working people everywhere.

The transit workers need—and deserve—your support. ■

*Danny Katch, Tiffany Paul, Sean Petty, Jessica Rothenberg, Lee Sustar, Tamar Szmulowicz, Hadas Thier and Chris Williams contributed to this article.*

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