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USA

Transit union shuts down New York

- News from around the world -

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What do you get when you mix together 35,000 angry workers, an arrogant management, a union leadership under pressure from its membership, a decades-long drive to shrink the public sector, a racial divide between bosses and workers, and miscalculations? In December 2005, you got a transit strike in New York City.

Responding to management's 11th hour demand that future workers pay a greater percentage of their income into the pension fund than current members do, the leadership of Local 100 of the Transport Workers Union called a strike on Dec. 20.

While Local 100's president, Roger Toussaint, had made it clear that the union would not accept reduced wages or benefits for future workers and that the union was determined to preserve transit jobs as an entry into the "middle-class" for future generations of workers, management continued to press the issue and precipitated the strike. But, on both sides, the roots of the strike go back years.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/transitstrikersnewyork.jpg>]

Strikers' rally

On the union's side, Toussaint had won office in 2000 as the candidate of the New Directions slate. ND had gotten its start in the late 1980s by opposing the givebacks being accepted by the union's leadership - including lower wages and benefits for new hires.

Although ND no longer exists, there remains strong opposition to givebacks among officers and members of the Local. Indeed, in the five days between the strike authorization vote and the contract expiration, hundreds of members concerned that Toussaint might not stand firm against givebacks had signed forms pledging to vote against any proposed contract that contained givebacks.

In a display of Toussaint's sensitivity on the issue, the Local's security detail had prohibited members from bringing "unauthorized" literature and signs, including ones simply stating "No Givebacks", into the membership meeting on Dec. 10 where the strike authorization vote was held.

For their part, management wanted to force the TWU to give up something. After high-profile contracts with the teachers and police officers were settled with lower starting pay (police) and longer hours (police and teachers), it was important to both NYC's Mayor Bloomberg and NY's Governor Pataki that transit workers be made to accept that no gains could be made without giving something back. (Transit workers negotiate with a state agency, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, whose chairman is appointed by Pataki. But, since the buses and subways are almost entirely within NYC, the mayor takes a keen interest in the negotiations.)

The potential for a strike was increased by the feeling among transit workers that the white billionaires (MTA chairman Kalikow and Mayor Bloomberg) who represented management's position were not treating the overwhelmingly Black and Latino transit workers and union officers with respect. This dovetailed with the conviction among transit workers that they receive little respect on the job because the transit workforce is largely Black and Latino.

When the strike was actually called, however, it took almost everyone by surprise - including most transit workers. Despite the posturing on both sides, the union leadership had done little to prepare its membership for a strike.

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The union had not established strike offices throughout the city. There had been no training for picket captains. In fact, most picket captains were appointed in the days immediately before the strike began! There was no structure in place to link the pickets at the sites spread throughout the city.

More important, the union had not clearly defined the issues for the membership or the workers of the city. These and other preparations in the months leading up to the contract expiration would not only have resulted in a stronger strike, they would have helped to build the union even if there wasn't a strike.

Even though they recognized the poor preparation, the sense among many transit workers was, "It's about time." Given the opportunity to show their importance to the city and its economy, they embraced the strike. Rank and file members stepped up to ensure that picket lines were established and staffed.

For three days, buses and subways in NYC did not move. Millions of people walked to wherever they had to go. Hundreds of millions of dollars worth of business were lost. But once the workers were out, they and their union were the target of a concerted attack by the bosses in the city.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/toussaintcentre.jpg>]
Roger Toussaint (centre)

It's illegal for public employees to strike in NY. If they do, each striker loses two days pay for each day they are on strike. In addition, the union is fined and risks losing its dues check-off. Since those penalties were not enough to prevent the strike, the MTA and Bloomberg upped the ante.

They got a judge to fine the union \$1 million for each day of the strike and fines up to \$25,000/day were being considered against each worker. The union's top officers were threatened with jail.

The city's papers tried to whip up public sentiment against the strike. (However, polls showed that a majority of city residents supported the union and this support was shown to the pickets everyday.) Mayor Bloomberg's calling the strikers "thugs" and "selfish" fueled the strikers' sense that they were being targeted because they were Blacks and Latinos.

While the MTA was prepared to escalate the fight, the union was not. Although many strikers called for pickets to be sent to the commuter railroads, the union leadership didn't act. The city's labor leaders, who had vowed their support at pre-strike rallies, did not organize any demonstrations or even bring their members out to the picket lines. On the third day, Toussaint recommended that the strike be ended so that talks would resume.

This was despite his pledge that the union would not return to work without a contract. Many transit workers returned to work with a mixture of pride, relief, and concern that they now faced givebacks in their contract, givebacks that could have been prevented if the union had been better organized and prepared to conduct its strike.

We were right to be concerned. The contract presented to the membership five days after the strike ended contains significant givebacks and only minor gains. The wages are the same as those offered by the MTA before the contract began. They will not enable transit workers to keep up with inflation. Before the strike, the union had taken the position that we would accept neither changes to the pension plan nor paying for medical benefits.

Afterwards, the leadership accepted a deal that, for the first time, requires all members to pay a minimum of 1.5% of their wages for medical insurance (the percentage rate will rise over the life of the contract). And, after transit workers finally used the leverage that a contract expiration during the holiday shopping season gave, Toussaint agreed to

push the expiration back a month to mid-January.

A key selling point (some say the only selling point) of the agreement is that about half the members will get a refund of excess money they had paid into the pension fund in the late 1990s. But even that has been thrown into question by Governor Pataki's office announced intention to veto the legislation needed for the refund to go through.

Although the proposal was endorsed overwhelmingly by the Local's Executive Board, it is meeting strong opposition among the membership. Opponents of the contract, including some union officers and many of the strike's picket captains, are organizing to persuade the Local's members to reject the contract when it comes to a vote.

Many members who were initially proud of themselves and their co-workers for saying "no" to the MTA and walking off the job are now wondering what the point of the strike was. Indeed, whether the contract is approved or rejected, its most important effect may be to undermine the feelings of accomplishment and solidarity that flowered with the strike.

If Local 100 members who were willing to strike and pay fines in defense of workers who are not yet on the job end up feeling that they were suckers to do so, a contract fight that could have strengthened the union will end up weakening it instead.