

As the Transport Workers Union attempts to push through major concessions

New York City transit workers speak out about workplace dangers and attacks on health care

By Daniel de Vries
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Thirty-seven thousand New York City transit workers have received ballots to vote on a sellout agreement hashed out between the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and the Transport Workers Union (TWU). While the TWU has tried to hide the extent of the concessions, claiming in its fraudulent highlights document that it “held the line on Health Care Costs (sic),” the reality is that the agreement contains \$44 million in health care and other givebacks.

Under the new terms, workers will be on the hook for new prescription drug co-pays and deductibles for emergency room visits. The union will also collaborate with management to impose increases in employee availability, pushing ill and injured workers to remain on duty.

Health care has long been a central issue for the city’s bus, rail and station workers, who year after year watch colleagues dying young or experience firsthand high rates of illnesses and injuries. WSWs reporters recently spoke with two veteran track workers, Jamal and Will, about the health hazards they face on the job.

“In my department, we’re the grunts, we’re underground,” Jamal said, referring to the rail division crews, who repair and reconstruct the city’s expansive, 115-year-old track system.

“When we leave our home on a daily basis there’s no guarantee you’re going to come home in the morning. We lost a young guy in his 20s, new to the job. He’s never going home. There’s a danger a guy might get crushed by a train. Or someone may drop something near the third rail and cause an explosion,” Will said.

In addition to the threat of injury from equipment, the pair described a suite of chronic health hazards they’re exposed to every day, including steel dust, diesel exhaust and biological contaminants associated with human waste and rat feces on the rails. “A lot of guys have respiratory infections, lung trouble, stuff like that. It’s almost like coal miner type of situation,” Jamal said. “Also, you don’t know the effects because there hasn’t been comprehensive study.”

Silica dust, which can lead to lung cancer, scarring of the lungs, kidney disease and other serious ailments, is emerging as another

major concern. Only recently have rail workers begun to learn about the threat to their health via a “right-to-know” class offered by the MTA.

“They give us a class, then you go and get checked up,” Jamal said. “But I think that’s also a cover up because a lot of people started getting sick with a silica disease. I have 18 years and I never heard of this till last year. Now they give us this training to cover their butts. Take the training, but the things we’re not supposed to be doing I’ve been doing for 12 of the 18 years.”

He explained how the process is set up to discourage workers from actually seeking out medical help. “They give us free testing for silica, but it’s not just silica testing. They test you for things like sleep apnea. And if you have sleep apnea, they take you out of service. Why am I getting tested for that? It’s a Catch 22. They scare the members from getting tested because nobody wants to be out of service pending a doctor’s review, which could take up to two or three months. They make you use your sick time, but if you don’t have that, it’s a messed-up circumstance.”

On the job, the MTA is required under federal rules to monitor for certain pollutants while workers are active in the confined space of the rail tunnels. Jamal and Will explained how this is carried out in practice.

“They have air monitors but very seldom will they stop a job if air quality reaches dangerous levels. They have monitors that register for CO2 and NO2. They do a horrendous job. It’s very common for you to walk up on a job site, where guys are working, and the monitors on the supervisor’s jacket are blaring. Those things they just ignore,” Will said.

“Air quality monitoring is a joke,” Jamal added. “Supervisors are supposed to wear these air monitors while we work. A lot of times they’re off or they’re not calibrated right. There’s no one policing them to do that. The union is supposed to, but you don’t see them out there like that. Like I said it’s a joke.”

“No one is doing anything to address the health issues,” Will said. “What I find very troubling about this new contract offer is a lot of track workers, a lot of [Rapid Transit Operations] workers,

girls and guys who are out on the tracks, suffer from respiratory ailments, namely asthma, bronchitis, allergies and things of that nature. Now they introduce this \$100 co-pay. What usually happens is that people come into work and feel fine. They start to feel sick at work, then they go home. So you're not going to have guys treated for service-connected injuries at work, you're going to have them be treated at home on personal time and then being charged \$100 for getting sick at work. That is perhaps the most ludicrous thing from the MTA since my time here. That is a major issue."

Jamal and Will also described a range of unhealthy and intolerable conditions in crew quarters, including extreme heat, overcrowding and rodent infestations. "When you get into the quarters where guys are supposed to be resting and recuperating from the work on the tracks, you get a lot of quarters and facilities and they are absolutely covered in black dust, steel dust," Will said. "If you look up at the vents or piping, they're just filthy, truly horrendous."

Jamal added, "At Tremont Avenue in the Bronx, this place was so bad they finally condemned it. To use the bathroom, you had to keep stomping your feet because the rats would run back and forth if you sat there quietly. Now how can you live like that?"

During inclement weather rail workers are required to report to the nearest location and often forced to work for long stretches. "Hurricane Sandy they held us hostage. I worked for 3 days and couldn't go home," Jamal said. While the MTA is required to provide food on such occasions, workers are often left to fend for themselves.

"They don't give a damn," Jamal said of the transit agency. "When they talk about savings and productivity and this and that, all I see is the sacrifice of myself and my transit brothers and sisters that we go through, the Christmases we're not home, the Thanksgivings we're not home, the storms we're stuck at work in cramped and tight spaces with eight to 10 other guys who haven't showered for two days because there are no facilities, and we're not eating properly. These are the things I see and I feel like we need to be adequately compensated for it.

"I'm 42 years old. My body says I'm 60. I grunt when I get up. My back is killing me, my knees, my leg. I started young but it's breaking me down. I want fair compensation for what I do," Jamal said, explaining that despite the dangers inherent in the job they do not receive hazard pay.

The deal the TWU cut with the MTA includes wage increases that don't keep pace with the increasing cost of living in New York City. Many workers have already been forced to relocate long distances away from their job sites to where housing costs are cheaper. Will commutes from 90 miles north of the city. Some co-workers live as far away as the state of Delaware, 130 miles from the city.

Others take as much overtime as possible, risking their long-term health in the process. "We are chronically understaffed, so especially in the track department guys do work a lot of overtime," Will said. "What happens is before you know it guys have put in 32 hours of overtime every weekend of the month. So you can imagine after four or five years, and then you have bodies beaten down, you'll see that decline in the age that people are

passing away because guys and women are working more to make ends meet and bodies just can't take it.

"The cost of living is so high, it's not even optional whether you work overtime. We get these paltry raises and it doesn't match the cost of living. Every month we're behind the eight-ball. You have to chase the money every month, and the only way to do that for a lot of guys is to be out on those tracks 32 hours this weekend and 32 hours the next weekend. Any given week you can have guys working 40-something, 50-something hours of overtime. That's perfectly normal."

When workers suffer serious illness or injury, the MTA commonly attempts to deny workers benefits while they are out of service.

Will suffered a workplace injury in August and has been sidelined ever since. "Financially my family is paying the price because I am physically unable to go to work. These are the types of situations that not only myself but a lot of transit workers, especially in the track department, are finding themselves in, being victimized by controverted claims. The MTA is contesting whether this injury happened on the job. Ironically, I was injured in front of my supervisor—directly in front of him.

"There are a lot of things our union should be focused on but it's simply not happening. I know of two other track workers right now who are also out on controverted claims and are not being paid for an excess of five months," Will said. Jamal relayed a story of a track worker suffering injuries after a passenger pushed him onto the rails. The MTA attempted to deny his claims, falsely asserting he was not injured in performance of his duties.

"People in this economic climate are living check to check," Will said. "To be able to manage your house, your family, pay your mortgage and car payment, this is very punitive for no good reason. I don't know how our union allows this to happen. We should have more rights.

"Not to sound oblivious to the finances of the MTA, but we are the people out there moving the city. Without the employees coming in rain, sleet, or snow—we come in, hurricane or whatever it is, we are there. We are moving the city. When they talk about debt service, I understand it, but we deserve what's right," Will said.

"To me it starts with the union first," Jamal added. "But the union in my opinion is so corrupt that they don't care anyway. The guys that are in office now are not doing the jobs they are supposed to do."

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