

## **Struck Out by Dan Jacoby**

After three contentious days, the transit strike is over. Hallelujah! So, why did it happen in the first place?

The short version is that the transit strike happened because George Pataki wanted it to happen. As Governor, Pataki controls the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), and they do what he tells them to do.

In the days leading up to the strike deadline, the Transit Workers Union (TWU) did what they always do – they played their usual game of brinksmanship-style “chicken”. They made outrageous demands, like an eight per cent raise each year for three years. They refused to deal with the issues on the table, specifically the pension and health insurance plans. Historically, the TWU has assumed that the MTA – meaning the Governor – would blink at the last minute, and historically, they’ve been right.

Actually, the TWU has usually been right. Occasionally the MTA doesn’t blink. Sometimes this means that the TWU backs down, and other times it means a strike.

This time it was clear that the MTA wouldn’t back down. It was also clear that the MTA’s proposals were negotiable. Indeed, the negotiations that are happening as I write this were predictable. If the TWU had actually negotiated from the start, the new contract would have been signed a week ago.

But the TWU didn’t negotiate early on, because they never have. Governor Pataki knew they wouldn’t, and this allowed him to force the strike he wanted.

If Pataki didn’t want a strike, he would have instructed the MTA to put a proposal on the table from which the TWU couldn’t have walked away. That proposal would have been much like the one being discussed right now. Instead, he instructed the MTA to hold firm to a proposal that the TWU simply couldn’t accept.

In short, the MTA was demanding that the TWU sacrifice its future pension coverage. The current discussion scraps that idea in favor of having workers contribute more toward their health coverage. This was entirely predictable, and was clearly predicted by George Pataki.

But how do we know George Pataki knew this?

Look at the “final” proposal the MTA put on the table just before the deadline. Rather than modifying the pension plan contributions in favor of health insurance contributions, the proposal demanded even more from the union. This final proposal could only be taken as an insult by TWU leaders – and their membership. It was designed specifically to push the TWU over the brink, and send them out to the picket lines.

Since then, George Pataki’s rhetoric has been remarkably narrow. He has taken the extreme right-wing, anti-union line. We all know that he is planning to run for President in 2008, and the conventional wisdom is that the Republican nominee will be whoever appeals to the right wing. By pushing the TWU out on strike and taking the hard line, Pataki is positioning himself to appeal to that right wing.

And the people of New York City got to pay for George Pataki’s political ambitions.