

US - NEW YORK - MTA Strike and Politics (Wayne Barrett, Power Plays)

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December 20, 2005 - [Power Plays](#)- Would this strike be happening if Governor George Pataki were running for re-election next year? Would Mike Bloomberg's city be shut down if the expiration date on the Transport Workers Union's contract were September or October, when he reached pre-election settlements with half a dozen city unions?

If your answer is no to either question, then you believe, as anyone with a memory in New York knows, that politics is the only explanation for this maddening and destructive strike.

Think back to 2002. To buy himself a third term, George Pataki delivered a billion-dollar giveaway to Dennis Rivera's health care workers and a multi-million dollar state subsidy to finance the largest salary increases in history for NYC teachers.

Two years earlier, on July 11, 2000, he signed legislation that was a \$36.5 billion boon to state and city unions over 10 years. The legislation awarded cost of living increases to 550,000 state and local retirees at a billion dollar a year cost. As much as the MTA was demanding a new tier of less costly pensions in these negotiations, the 2000 legislation scrapped the special tier created during the 70's fiscal crisis and freed a half million public employees from making pension contributions. When the city followed suit, the cost of this pension giveaway doubled to another billion a year. Another \$16.5 billion in pension sweeteners for cops, firefighters, teachers and others brought Pataki's re-election pension tally, even benefiting transit workers, to a budget-busting crescendo.

Now, with a foot in New Hampshire on his way out the door, George Pataki has discovered that New York has a pension crisis and that 34,000 transit workers who earn half of what Ron Lauder pays Libby Pataki a year should be enlisted to solve it. Up to almost the final hour of negotiations, Pataki's MTA wanted the transit workers to agree to support legislation extending the retirement age of future workers from 55 to 62. Then, they shifted to a demand that would require these workers to contribute 6 percent of earnings over their first ten years of employment to their pensions. With starting pay for car cleaners, for example, at \$29,958, the union was not about to trade an \$1819 pension cut for half that in 3 percent salary increases. Especially when the MTA was waving a billion dollar surplus in the union's face, and especially when it may well be a violation of the Taylor Law for the MTA to use collective bargaining to try to rewrite pension legislation.

The same governor who could find unimaginable billions in pension goodies when he was still running in this state was ready, once he knew he'd never run again, to provoke a devastating strike over a few million in pension savings. Such is the personal politics of no-tomorrow.

Deferring one more time to this Albany partner, Mike Bloomberg kept calling the MTA offer "generous" even when the authority was demanding a new 62-year-old retirement date. It apparently did not occur to him that he'd never pressed for raising the pension date in any of the politically productive deals he'd cut just months earlier. Trading in the Mayor Merit title of his early first term for the Mayor Mouth nickname often applied to his Brooklyn Bridge union-busting predecessor, Bloomberg even appeared to forget that he'd agreed in October to push for retirement at 55 for teachers. The crucial pre-election settlement he reached with the teachers union creates a labor/management committee to develop a pension bill that would do the precise opposite of what the MTA sought: changing the retirement age from 62 to 55.

The mayor has once again become a tabloid hero by demanding pension reductions, but no one in the

media pack is demanding that he explain why that's only his post-settlement and post-election position. If dramatic change in public employee pensions is needed, the only people who can deliver it are Bloomberg, Pataki, the next governor, and the legislature. The good government groups, editorial boards, and business interests who believe this is vital should be chasing a broadbased solution to a broadbased problem, not targeting a single union and bringing the city to a halt.

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