

Statement of Jose DeJesus, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) President/Business Agent, ATU Local 1179 to NYS Senate-Assembly Hearing on Impact of COVID-19 on the MTA & public transportation, August 25, 2020

Thank you, Chairmen Comrie, Kennedy, and Paulin, for this opportunity to present on behalf of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1179. I am Jose DeJesus, President/Business Agent of the local.

While these hearings focus on the MTA, what I highlight applies to all transit workers on the frontlines of the fight against COVID-19. This includes the members of ATU Local 1179 in Queens, Local 726 in Staten Island, Local 1056 also in Queens and Local 1181 in Brooklyn – and the riding public. Local 1179 members operate and maintain MTA Bus routes serving Queens with some routes extending into Brooklyn and Manhattan. ATU members are working under an expired contract that the MTA **REFUSES** to update. The MTA already settled a new contract including new wages for the workers represented by TWU Local 100; this creates two classes of workers paid differently to perform the same work. Many of the legislators present today and others flagged this inequity to the MTA and we thank you.

The ATU recognizes, as do most experts, that without a fully functioning transit system, we cannot expect New York City's – and thus our state and national – economy to fully recover and achieve growth beyond. That includes treating all workers fairly and equitable. All who perform the same worker must receive the same pay and not be treated as part of some caste. ATU workers deserve a contract for the same work as those the MTA already settled with and refuses to discuss with ATU.

Our members were classified as essential employees and continued to work in order to make sure other essential workers, including doctors, nurses, police, grocery store clerks and others, can get to their jobs and return home to their families. The work of our members has put them at an increased high risk of exposure to the coronavirus. This exposure has not been without consequences. In New York, ATU Locals have lost 33 of our brothers and sisters to COVID-19; they put their lives on the line as essential workers during this crisis. And our members perform their jobs in an exemplary manner despite the MTA treating them as second-class workers without the same compensation afforded other brothers and sisters at Local 100 working at the MTA under a new contract.

Transit Workers are unable to shelter in place, we require a workplace that provides the minimum “at home” shelter or better “shelter” at the workplace. Transit workers are exposed to all dangers and still have shown great resiliency mentally and physically under uncertain conditions despite the MTA treating them as second-class workers without the same compensation afforded other brothers and sisters at Local 100 working at the MTA under a new contract.

The priority of the ATU has been to protect the health and safety of our members who are essential workers on the frontline of this crisis. At the start of this crisis, our members were put in harm's way without proper protection. Our workers were not given the personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks, gloves and cleaning supplies, necessary to prevent transmission of this virus. It was their unions that supplied those basic and mandatory items. While our members have better but limited access to PPE now, the delay in getting this equipment was too significant. We must ensure that the MTA has access to and supplies PPE equipment its workers on the frontlines. We must also ensure that the MTA sets mandatory standards for PPE for transit workers and for cleaning buses and transit

stations. These standards need not only apply to the situation today but also apply going forward so we are not as ill-prepared for a situation like this in the future. And our members continue to put themselves at risk while the MTA treats them as second-class workers without the same compensation afforded other brothers and sisters at Local 100 working at the MTA under a new contract.

In addition to PPE, the MTA must put in place protections to guarantee the safety of our members. The MTA needs to equip buses with a functional sheeting or Plexiglas barriers to deflect the spread or spittle of the virus. It must assure proper ventilation on its equipment including buses and ALL work spaces. We need the highest achievable MERV (Minimum Efficiency Reporting Values) filters. We need protections for our drivers; explore off-site fare boxes to minimize driver contact with passengers and speed up the timeline on implementation of the OMNY (One Metro New York) system. Our depots – some built in the early 1900's – need upgrading, including HVAC systems; to improve social distancing, explore a remote clock-in/clock-out system for workers as they report to work. We must also closely explore the airflow on buses and adjust designs of current and upcoming fleets need. Air in buses recycles in the cabin and then flows to the front potentially carrying bacteria and viruses with it. We must work to ensure up-to-date ventilation and air control systems on our buses that meet the appropriate airflow standards to ensure the health and safety of our drivers and passenger our transit workers suffer pulmonary diseases at rates as 70% or higher than the general public. This remains all the more important as fare collection on all MTA buses resumes next week on August 31, and the MTA still refuses to treat our members as anything but second-class workers without the same compensation afforded other brothers and sisters at Local 100 working at the MTA under a new contract.

Cleaning protocols are needed; ATU supports a recently mandated 24-hour cleaning schedule of all transit equipment. ATU supports the cessation of private operators during the overnight hours and better deployment of buses to serve those working in the wee hours while subways remain closed for cleaning. And still MTA refuses to negotiate an end to the treatment of our members as second-class workers without the same compensation afforded other brothers and sisters at Local 100 working at the MTA under a new contract.

Our members continued to show up to work despite these real threats to their health and safety. We believe that our members should be compensated for their work through the implementation of hazard pay, which would be 1.5 times their normal wage rate the funding provided from the federal government should have allocated to the membership. The hardworking men and women came to work and ensured that other essential workers could get to where they needed to go. Their dedication and hard work must be recognized and never marginalized. And MTA requires our members to work as second-class public servants without the same compensation afforded other brothers and sisters at Local 100 working at the MTA under a new contract.

We know that all of these initiatives will require more funding, and we also know that financial situation facing the State right now is dire. Through ATU International, we strongly support the inclusion of \$32 billion in emergency operating aid for public transportation in the next round of federal Coronavirus relief funding. These funds would be used to maintain essential service, avoid layoffs, and to purchase PPE to keep our members safe. We are also supporting funding for state and localities because in addition to the emergency aid, we know that funding is needed to shore up the support we receive from the State and the City. We must avert the simply devastating cuts to public transportation being contemplated absent additional funding. We cannot cut public transportation services during this economic downturn or this pandemic. Too many people rely on our services to get to and from work and to and from doctors' appointments, the grocery store and other essential services. COVID-19 has shown all the economic pitfalls and adverse impacts of cost-cutting over past years on

programs that never should have been reduced or eliminated in a city this size. But it does not shine attention on public servants delivering public transit as second-class workers without the same compensation afforded other brothers and sisters at Local 100 working at the MTA under a new contract.

The lack of financial support from the federal government also impacts our ability to finalize a contract for our members with the MTA. For decades, pattern bargaining at the MTA resulted in the members of the ATU receiving the same benefits negotiated between the TWU and the MTA. This year, the MTA refuses to honor this pattern bargaining. Settling our contracts collectively involves very little impact on the MTA overall operating budget. We need to ensure that the MTA receives adequate funding so they can honor their contractual obligations.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today on the impact of COVID-19 on the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and public transportation. We need a protected, safe and healthy workforce and workplace to provide levels of service needed to assure the Riding public, they can safely return to work via public transit. The impact on public transportation and our members has been significant, and I appreciate you holding this hearing to hear from those directly impacted. And the MTA needs to compensate ALL workers delivering public transit at the same levels.

I am happy to serve as a resource and offer advice and guidance on this and other issues as we move forward.

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