* Just days before Christmas 2005, New York City’s mass transit workers went on strike. The city’s residents and leaders saw the strike as a 3-day nightmare. Commuters, enduring hours of crippling traffic, went to work by bicycle, in cars, or even on water-taxis. Those who chose to hoof it made five and six-mile treks in 20 degree temperatures. Many employees stayed home and worked from there. Stores, restaurants, museums, and theatres lost significant sales in a busy time of year. Off-Broadway shows reduced ticket prices to fill seats and restaurants reported a 40 percent drop in customers.  The cost and inconvenience elicited little sympathy for the striking workers. “This is a strike intentionally designed to take place at a time of year when it can hurt the most people the quickest,” Mayor Michael Bloomberg declared. “It was just unconscionable.”

What the transit workers thought unconscionable was the Metropolitan Transit Authority’s stance on   pensions. After the MTA had proposed a 2-tiered system in which new workers pay more toward their pensions, the members of Transit Workers Union Local 100 walked out of contract negotiations and authorized the first transit strike in 25 years.1 On Tuesday morning, December 20, 2005, all members of TWU Local 100 walked off the job.

Both Governor George Pataki and Mayor Michael Bloomberg took a hard line against the strike. The city went to court, where the judge disagreed with the union claim that the MTA had provoked the strike. The court declared the strike in violation of New York’s Taylor Law, which prohibits certain state employees from striking, and imposed a $1 million-a-day fine on the union and ordered striking workers to lose two-days pay for each day on strike.2 The MTA asked for a mediation panel, and the two sides resumed negotiations. The union’s board voted to end the strike and keep talking with management, a decision not popular with some workers. “This is total suicide,” said TWU vice president John Mooney. “We’re going back to work without contracts, and we’ll discuss issues and merits after Christmas. Christmas is our bargaining chip, and we’re giving away our bargaining chip.”

Negotiations resulted in TWU president Roger Toussaint’s agreeing to management’s proposal of a three-year contract with pay raises over three years and a 1.5 percent payment toward health benefits, but no pension contributions. Some union members disagreed with their leaders and   campaigned strongly against the proposal; in January 2006 with 22,000 members voting, it was voted down by only seven votes. In response, MTA management planned to invoke a legal provision to allow the contract terms to be determined by binding arbitration.3

The NYC transit strike demonstrated how important it is for unions to win support from the public and other unions. There was little evidence of solidarity, since no other unions gave firm support to the TWU Local 100. The strike also raised questions about the current status of labor unions. Management definitely had the upper hand, with the strike ending quickly and workers back on the job with no contract and no concessions won over pensions. This case and the UAW’s concessions to GM and Ford over health care benefits will be in everyone’s mind the next time unions and management negotiate, probably over pension and health care costs, the issues replacing traditional union concerns of wages and job security