



TESTIMONY OF DANIEL CASSELLA, CHAIR, AMALGAMATED TRANSIT UNION
NEW YORK STATE LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE BOARD AND
PRESIDENT/BUSINESS AGENT, AMALGAMATED TRANSIT UNION LOCAL 726 TO
THE SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON CIVIL SERVICE AND PENSIONS TO
DISCUSS RETENTION AND RECRUITMENT FOR CIVIL SERVICE JOBS IN NEW YORK
STATE, THE NEW YORK STATE PENSION FUND, PENSIONS, AND CIVIL SERVICE
BENEFITS

OCTOBER 11, 2023

Senate Civil Service and Pensions Chair Jacksons and members of the Senate Committee on Civil Service and Pensions, I thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony for your consideration as you review the issues surrounding retention and recruitment for civil service jobs in New York, as well as related pension and benefit issues. My name is Daniel Cassella, and I serve as the President of the Amalgamated Transit Union (“ATU”) New York State Legislative Conference Board and as President/Business Agent of ATU Local 726 in Staten Island. I am submitting this testimony on behalf of the ATU New York State Legislative Conference Board. We represent more than 25,000 hard-working transit workers throughout New York ATU cities, including Albany, Binghamton, Buffalo, New York City, Rochester and Syracuse.

Since 1916, my Local 726 has represented the Operators, Mechanics, and other titles of the various bus companies have operated local bus service here on Staten Island. We now represent 2,000 employees and retirees of New York City Transit. We operate 23 local routes here on Staten Island. Two of those routes provide service to Brooklyn and one provides service to Bayonne N.J. We also operate 22 express routes between Staten Island and Manhattan.

For the most part, ATU members are public employees. The ATU has negotiated extensive contracts with public authorities to ensure that our members have access to the best healthcare, job protections, and salaries available. However, given the driver shortage facing New York, we need help from the State to bring in more workers.

All public transit authorities are grappling with driver shortages. It is difficult to recruit and retain drivers when the occupation of transit worker has become increasingly dangerous. Transit workers were essential workers during the pandemic and put themselves and their families at risk to do their jobs. This is a lot to ask of any worker, and we still grieve for the ATU members we lost to COVID-19. In addition to the pandemic, we have seen the increase of passenger violence against transit workers. In one week of September 2023, four MTA bus operators were attacked on the job. This workplace hostility makes retaining and recruiting new drivers even more difficult.

While historically working in the public transportation sector was a desired career that many sought, we have seen a shift in that in recent years. Newer generations are not as drawn to a career in public transit. Many drivers are recruited to the private delivery sector, which often have higher upfront salaries and a much lower risk of physical, on-the-job violence. We must work to address this and explore ways to entice new employees to the profession and retain the workers we currently have.

Given the tight labor market conditions that we have been facing for the past few years, it is difficult to compete with higher-paying private sector driving work. The public sector's main recruitment tool against this pattern is offering substantially superior benefits to private sector jobs. Enhancing benefits for public transit employees – be it through improving pensions, expanded health insurance coverage, or other “perks” that are marketable to prospective and new employees

– would be essential to our recruitment efforts. Workers may be offered higher salaries at a private delivery company, but the State pension and healthcare offered by public authorities can offset the allure of a higher up-front salary. Further, for public transit workers, state funding for plexiglass barriers in buses would sharply limit the instances of passenger violence against drivers.

In addition, another difficulty in hiring new employees in the public transportation sector is the length of the hiring process. When most people are looking for a new job, they do not have months to waste waiting for bureaucracy to issue a job offer. Every day, we lose talented, qualified individuals to the private sector because we cannot make a job offer in an expeditious fashion. Public transportation agencies must have the ability to review and hire employees more quickly.

Likewise, workers for public transportation agencies must have more retraining and advancement opportunities. Given the State's ambitious climate goals, which include phasing in electric buses, public transit authorities must be given the tools to retrain workers to work on these vehicles. Switching from an internal combustion engine to an electric vehicle is a significant switch for mechanics, and many are concerned about their long-term job security. The State must make it a priority to continue funding workforce development programs that retrain public transportation employees to work on electric buses.

Finally, as we noted above, the pension benefits used to serve as a significant recruitment tool for transit workers. However, this is no longer the case. We believe that many changes are needed to Tier VI, but there are several specific changes needed for transit workers. The New York State Retirement and Social Security Law was amended by Chapter 18 of the Laws of 2012, which established a new Tier VI retirement plan in New York. Since the enactment of Tier VI, the ATU has seen a decrease in the applicants for bus workers in the industry and part of the reason for this is because of the decreased pension benefits that resulted from Tier VI. ATU supports many

changes to the Tier VI rules including changes to the calculation of final average salary and contribution adjustments. In addition, the ATU supports a change unique to transit workers and the overtime hours cap. The standard work week for a transit worker is 50 hours per week. The Tier VI overtime cap contemplated a standard work week of 40 hours per week. A change must be made to this overtime calculation for transit workers to recognize that a transit workers standard week is 50 hours so that a standard work week does not trigger hours being counted toward the overtime cap after 40 hours per week. We think this change is imperative for transit workers and would help to alleviate some of the worker shortages in the industry.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony on the recruitment and retention of public transit employees. For the reasons outlined above, the Amalgamated Transit Union New York State Legislative Conference Board strongly supports proposals to enhance public employee benefits for public transportation workers, as well as proposals to reduce the time to hire new employees.