

TRANSPORTATION

NJ Transit engineers could strike as talks over higher wages have hit an impasse

The union says the pay disparity between NJ Transit engineers and those at other commuter lines has grown for decades.

by [Thomas Fitzgerald](#)
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Bargaining on a new contract between NJ Transit and the agency's locomotive engineers has stalled, and union leaders say the dispute could require White House intervention as soon as next month. If they two sides don't reach agreement, the union could strike.

A lockout or strike on NJ Transit would be disruptive to the regional economy, snarling traffic into and out of New York City and inconveniencing some Philadelphia-area commuters who use the railroad's Northeast Corridor service via Trenton. NJ Transit also runs daily trains [between 30th Street Station and Atlantic City](#).

NJ Transit trains carried an average 178,904 passengers daily in 2020.

The impasse is over the union's demand that NJ Transit increase the pay scale for its engineers to catch up with their counterparts at other passenger railroads in the region, said Jim Brown, general chairman of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLE&T).

"We just want equal pay," Brown said in an interview. "We're not asking for more, but we certainly don't want less."

NJ Transit locomotive engineers are paid 8% to 23% less than train operators with similar qualifications and responsibilities at Amtrak, Metro-North, the Long Island Rail Road and PATH, a bistate rapid transit service, said James Louis, a national vice president of the BLE&T who oversees passenger rail locals in the northeast.

NJ Transit officials have not responded to request for comment.

In December, Congress [blocked 115,000 freight rail workers](#) from going on strike and forced them to accept a five-year contract that included 24% raises and \$5,000 in bonuses but didn't address their biggest concern, onerous work rules.

Many freight engineers, conductors and others are [required to be on call 24/7 and don't receive paid time off for medical care](#).

The deal was negotiated by a presidential emergency board appointed by the White House under the Railway Labor Act. President Joe Biden and congressional leaders said they had to act because a freight-railroad strike could have thrown the economy into a deep recession.

Commuter lines are also subject to the federal law, written with the intent [to prevent disruptions](#) in critical rail service. NJ Transit and the engineers union have been negotiating for three years, with the help of a mediator since October 2020.

Relations have been contentious. Last summer, NJ Transit accused BLE&T of an ["illegal job action" on Juneteenth](#), when several hundred engineers called out, forcing cancellations. Unlike the agency's 14 other rail unions, who had agreed to new contracts, engineers do not get a paid day off for the holiday.

NJ Transit has proposed a contract that would pay the engineers \$44.78 an hour this year, while the union proposal would pay them \$51.53, around average for its peer railroads, Louis said.

The problem is that management has offered percentage pay increases over the years, BLE&T members at NJ Transit started from a lower base pay rate than on the other commuter lines.

"One of the reasons why it's coming to a real head is the gap keeps increasing," Brown said.

"The guys are firm. ... They will not accept something subpar this time. They are going to stand strong."

In 2016, an NJ Transit contract negotiations were settled hours before the strike deadline. The last railroad strike against NJ Transit was in 1983.

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