

ON THE STRIKE

By MICHAEL GOODWIN



How the TWU blew it

There are 8 million reasons transit workers were wrong to strike, but the union's obsession with three key words ultimately took them off the track. Here are those words and how the union leaders misused them to cause this debacle:

Surplus: The MTA has always been a wizard at making money disappear, but it entered contract talks showing a surplus of \$1 billion. The union bosses saw

the pile and dreamed of getting some, to the tune of 8% annual raises. That's a laughable demand, and they compounded their mistake by claiming such big hikes were earned because the workers created the surplus.

Not true. In fact, that honor goes to taxpayers. They shelled out hundreds of millions of dollars in taxes to subsidize the MTA. Portions of two fairly obscure state taxes — the mortgage recording tax and the property transfer tax — are dedicated to the MTA, and both turned in far higher than expected collections because of the real estate boom.

Another contributor is the sales tax, with one-eighth of a penny in the city going to trains and buses. Altogether, higher tax income provided \$733 million, or 70% of the surplus. Lower interest rates saved the agency an additional \$170 million, or 17%, according to the state controller's office. Still, the union will get a huge chunk of the surplus. Almost half — \$450 million — is being spent on pensions and it was offered salary hikes of 10.5% over three years.

Unborn: Sometimes it seemed union head Roger Toussaint had ventured into the abortion debate when he said the MTA wanted him to "sell out the unborn." He chose that loaded word to reject sensible demands that future workers contribute more to the cost of their benefits.

Here are the facts: Health and pension costs threaten to bankrupt government just as much as they do auto manufacturers and airlines. MTA officials say those costs have tripled in recent years



VIC NICASTRO

Pickers sign in with TWU reps on Union Turnpike yesterday.

and that pension spending hit \$453 million last year. Costs are expected to keep rising and are a large part of projected deficits in 2007 and 2008.

The agency is right to shift some of the burden to workers, just as many private companies have, with one difference: Benefits for current workers are untouched. The MTA offered options — later retirement, longer service, greater contributions — all applying only to future employees. Each time the union said no. One labor leader called that stance "an ideology."

Like most ideologies, it ignores reality and brings its own pain. Thanks to the Taylor Law, its followers face big penalties.

Respect: This is the union's

catch-all phrase for why it's striking, covering everything from salary to discipline to working conditions. No doubt it has some valid issues, but, with apologies to Aretha Franklin, disrupting Christmas week for millions of people is no way to get R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Even Michael O'Brien, president of the TWU International, the striking local's parent union, said he warned against a strike. "I told them that the only road to contract victory for the membership was not by strike but continued negotiation."

That brings to mind three words the union should have remembered: *Father knows best.* That would have saved them, and us, a lot of trouble.

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BE OUR GUEST

By BARRY LEWIS

Concrete jungle needs its green

Our front lawns are disappearing. Yes, here in New York City. Sounds like a suburban problem? Not really. When we say "New York," we think of apartment houses on Park Ave. and townhouses in Greenwich Village, but the city has five boroughs — not one — and dozens of our Queens, Brooklyn, Staten Island and Bronx neighborhoods are made up of rowhouses, apartment houses with front gardens and freestanding houses ranging from the mansions of Riverdale to the small, wood-frame homes of Woodhaven.

In every one of these communities there's a fight going on between those who want to keep the front gardens green and those who want a parking lot, or at least pavers and concrete instead of grass.

When we lose our front gardens to parked cars and pavers, we lose something quite special about our New York City neighborhoods. The first thing we lose is our sidewalks. What makes us urban is that we walk. We walk to shopping, to transit, to visit friends or simply to walk. Whether made up of houses or apartment buildings, New York City neighborhoods are walking communities. But our right to continue this city's great walking tradition has been slowly compromised by bicyclists, Rollerbladers and skateboarders who think having small wheels or no combustion engine means they're really just a pedestrian with a little "extra."

Now we have to wonder if we'll be mowed down by motorists who believe the sidewalk is

the anteroom to their private parking lot.

This push to pave also compromises the wonderful sense of space and greenery that front gardens give us.

Coming home from work, from the in-your-face crowded and claustrophobic working districts of Manhattan, we get off the train or bus and we can walk down a street that is a veritable linear greenbelt: Curbside trees frame the street, front garden trees only add to that verdure, and open front yards and gardens give us a feeling of spaciousness and greenery that relaxes our minds and renews our souls.

As those yards disappear, the greenery and trees ripped out and walls of chain-link put up to protect the newly paved front helicopter pad, the street's entire character changes. What had been a greenbelt is gradually transformed into a crowded and ugly back alley.

So, we have to decide: Do we want back alleys or do we want a linear greenbelt of trees, flowering shrubs and grass? Do we want a sidewalk we can safely walk down, encouraging us to live an urban lifestyle, or do we want a demilitarized zone where we must pick our way among car trunks and front grilles, waiting to be run over by an SUV the size of Rhode Island? New Yorkers, wake up: We are losing something that made our residential neighborhoods truly civilized places to live in.

Lewis is an architectural historian whose series of walking tours with David Hartman can be seen on PBS.

Paving over lawns ruins flora and undermines our great walking tradition

SKENAZY'S WORLD By LENORE SKENAZY



Strike offers idea whose time has come

It was during the transit strike of 1980 that the dollar vans in the boroughs suddenly took off. Cross your fingers that the strike of '05 will bring us another new form of transportation just as cheap, efficient and funky: shared taxis.

If it does, New York could finally join the rest of the world in offering its citizens a great alternative to poky buses and pricey cab rides.

Shared taxis, known as *she-roots* in Israel, *dolmuses* in Turkey and other odd names throughout the Middle East and

Asia, are actually even more efficient than the taxis so pleasantly — almost shockingly — plentiful on the streets of Manhattan yesterday.

The cabs here were stopping for anyone flagging them down (maybe because it wasn't raining). But then they had to reject the folks not going pretty much the same place as the passengers already inside — a waste of everyone's time. By contrast, the shared taxis in other countries have specific destinations posted on their sides.

So, for instance, a cab labeled,

"GRAND CENTRAL/PENN STATION" would wait at a specific spot outside Grand Central until four people climbed in. Then it would lurch off to Penn Station. There it would do the same thing: Wait for four passengers, have each pay a flat fee of maybe \$3, and plug its way back to Grand Central.

There are already two shared taxi stands in Manhattan, both on the upper East Side, zipping tightwad titans down to Wall Street for about \$5 each. Lucky them.

But yesterday was a revelation

for the rest of us. Folks like me, who usually spend long hours at the bus stop grinding our teeth and re-reading the HBO poster now dared to dream *beyond the bus*. Imagine shared cabs shuttling between popular spots like Union Square, Macy's, Columbia and the train stations. Imagine shared taxis ping-ponging between First Ave. and Broadway on all the major streets (Eighth, 34th, 57th) that don't have subway lines. Imagine shared taxis every place the buses are too slow and the subway lines aren't direct.

Maybe that's the reason so many people looked kind of buoyant on the streets yesterday. Sure, they'd been thrown for a loop. But they'd been thrown outside the envelope and it was kind of cool out there!

Just think, says transportation consultant Bruce Schaller: the last strike even gave us women wearing clunky sneakers to work. There's no telling how a strike can change things.

Let shared cabs be this year's Adidas. Without the little white anklets.

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