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MTA, LIRR Unions Return to Table

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New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority and a consortium of eight Long Island Rail Road unions resumed contract talks four days before the unions are authorized to strike.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo, on the sidelines until now, seemed to be behind the latest initiative to settle.

"We must do everything we can to prevent Long Islanders from being held hostage by a strike that would damage the regional economy and be highly disruptive for commuters," Cuomo said in a July 16 statement. "Both the MTA and the LIRR unions need to put the interests of New Yorkers first by returning to the table today and working continuously to avoid a strike."

The MTA is a state agency, although the federal Railway Labor Act governs commuter rail line LIRR's employees, who are allowed to strike. MTA's subway and bus workers cannot under the Taylor Law. The MTA settled with Transport Workers Union Local 100 two months ago.

"We need a sensible labor-relations scheme. The LIRR situation is symptomatic of a pretty crazy system," Charles Brecher, consulting research director for the Citizens Budget Commission watchdog organization, told the MTA's Transportation Reinvention Commission at midtown Manhattan headquarters on July 16. "If you work for MTA, you work for MTA."

The MTA has proposed raising employees' pay by a little over 18% over seven years. The union wants 17% over six. The MTA's offer also calls for some health-care contributions by LIRR workers for the first time, and longer periods before moving to higher pay scales.

State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli, citing LIRR ridership information as well as census and economic data, estimated that a strike could cause up to \$50 million daily in lost economic activity.