

# Toussaint gutsy?

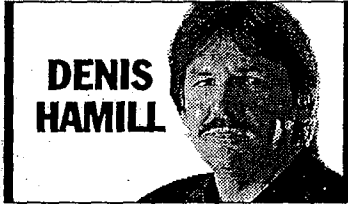
**R**OGER TOUSSAINT is no hero.

But he's got guts. No, he didn't run into a burning building to save a family on Christmas Eve. But as president of Transport Workers Union Local 100 he stood up for his rank and file in this age of union-busting and walked away victorious.

In the end, after the mayor, the governor and Metropolitan Transportation Authority officials branded him a thug and a criminal, after many in the press shamelessly demonized him, he got his workers a decent raise, recovered pension overpayments and sealed a 37-month contract that can only be called a triumph.

Here's a New York immigrant with a foreign accent, reminiscent of the great Mike Quill, who looked into the shaved pink faces of the MTA and said go to hell, we're not going to accept your two-tiered-eat-your-young-divide-and-conquer-union-busting tactics that will lead to the collapse of the union.

Toussaint called the bluff of the MTA, which state Attorney General Eliot Spitzer described as the most mismanaged agency in the state, a Rubik's Cube of a bureaucracy that extorted two recent fare increases for less service, the elimination of token



booth clerks and a downsizing of train conductors, and can't decide if it's \$300 million in the red or has a billion dollar surplus.

If you or I tried to offer those two sets of books to the IRS on April 15 we'd be sharing a cell with Bernie Ebbers from WorldCom by Christmas. Toussaint refused to have his workers balance the MTA's books with givebacks.

Now, you expect Mayor Bloomberg and Gov. Pataki and MTA Chairman Peter Kalikow to bad-mouth Toussaint and turn up the rhetoric on the rank and file. That's their job. It's a public relations war between management and labor, a game of high-risk strip poker.

But what was most disturbing about the strike was the hysterical vitriol in the print and electronic press in this city that tried to paint the knuckleheads who mismanage the MTA on a daily basis as the good guys, and the working stiffes who actually drive our buses and trains, who clean our rat-infested tunnels, who do the grunt work for the most miraculous transit system on the planet as the villains.

One of the knocks on Transit Authority workers is that they make \$55,000 a year, with overtime. Excuse me, but in order to make \$55,000 with overtime, you have to have given years of dedicated service and you have to work the overtime, on grueling nights and on lots of holidays, taking time away from your family and your private life. And among that \$55,000 average are thousands of lower-ranking workers who make tens of thousands of dollars less per year.

And that average is not the result of governmental benevolence. Transit workers in this city have slowly inched into the working middle class in the 21st century because of the tireless negotiations of their union over the decades.

It might be interesting to keep in mind that Mayor John Lindsay and the transit officials back then demonized Quill as fiercely as their current counterparts did Toussaint, and even went so far as jailing him; later, the

MTA named a bus depot after Quill. When the history of this strike is written, Toussaint will not be wearing the black hat. I don't pretend to compare the two men in historical stature, but keep in mind that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was once called a national security threat. Today, his name adorns a national holiday.

But the insane anti-union hysteria in the press, pundits calling for a Ronald Reagan-style mass firing of the 33,700 transit workers, painting Toussaint as Public Enemy No. 1 and rabid right-wing nuts demanding jail time and huge fines for a three-day strike aren't representative of the New York I've known since birth.

I grew up the son of a union man in Brooklyn, where there was fierce solidarity among fellow workers. Where I came from, you voted Democratic, you rooted for the underdog and you never crossed a picket line.

Yeah, okay, so the TWU technically broke the Taylor Law when they went out on strike. But, c'mon, this strike was more an act of civil disobedience against an intractable bureaucracy than a crime. To call the TWU strikers criminals is like calling the freedom marchers criminals. Rosa Parks broke the law, too, when she refused to get to the back of the bus. The president of the TWU, as far as I know, wasn't tapping anyone's phone without a warrant, like the President of the United States did.

Toussaint refused to sell out new or as yet unborn transit workers. He emerged victorious in a David versus Goliath battle. That's why, looking back on 2005, Toussaint emerges as one of the people in this city with real guts.

It's only a matter of time before they name a bus depot after him.

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