

## The Three Day Week?

Our union has been a strong advocate of the Alternative Work Schedule since Mayor Ed Koch first sought to implement them in the 1980's. He was then responding to 4,000,000 passengers on public transit on weekdays. Alternative Work Schedules (AWS) would reduce crowding on our public transport system. Instead of insisting on a 9:00AM till 5:00PM five day week, an 8:00AM till 5:45PM routine could result in a four day week. This would also enable many City office workers to avoid the worst of the rush hour.

I personally have a great deal of love for our public transport system. My father and my brother were both very conscientious workers who were each a proud part of that system. Even so, I never did learn to love rush hour.

I rode it once a week as a child, with my Mother, in order to get treated for asthma at a clinic downtown. I rode it again, weekday mornings, once I reached High School. As soon as I reached 16 years of age and I went to work, after school, as a messenger out of a 42nd Street office, I had to ride both early and later rush hours.

It was bad. It can be bad now, but try it during the years before each subway car had air conditioning and you will understand how bad it could be.

Once I reached college I deliberately scheduled myself to arrive at 8:00AM for my first classes and, in doing so, it made my daily commute quite bearable.

After graduation from college, I was pleased to hold jobs that enabled me to travel against the main flow of traffic during rush hour. As a Welfare Worker I could continue living in the West Bronx and travel, often seated, on bus or train, to Welfare Centers in the Bronx. After a day in the field, I could return home on nearly empty subway cars heading towards Manhattan.

At some point, I did lose my advantage. First, my union, and then the City, required me to go Downtown and show up by 9AM on weekdays. It was not ideal.

Then came the Alternative Work Schedule and the Four Day Week. I usually worked five or six days a week, four for the City and two more for the union, but I mostly escaped the rush hour crowds since I arrived at 8:00AM and returned late in the evenings.

We lost the chance for Alternate Work Schedules, mostly, during the Giuliani and Bloomberg Mayoralties. Those administrations preferred appointing "control freaks" who showed neither respect nor consideration for their workers. As one Commissioner put it on arrival, "I work a five day week, this whole Agency works a five day week." There was no reasonable argument nor realities considered, just whimsy and satisfying of the bosses own built in insecurities. This came at the cost of a good program that had worked well for years.

It was against that backdrop that OSA put in a special bargaining demand in our first contract negotiation with the De Blasio administration. It was a modest demand and we naively expected it to be embraced by the City.

After all, there were now 6,000,000 daily passengers, fifty percent more than when Ed Koch felt a need for rush hour relief. Also, our demand would cost the City not one penny of extra salary and even could save a bit through increased productivity and easier work force retention.

We were wrong.

We had asked the City to agree to a voluntary Alternate Work Schedule in any situation where it made sense. Rules covering the program had previously been worked out by Mayor Koch. Also, after a quarter century hiatus, Ed's prior Personnel and Labor Relations Commissioner Bob Lynn was again serving our City as Bill De Blasio's Labor Relations Commissioner. We asked for the same rules as under Koch, and we expected an early yes.

Instead, the City stalled us in bargaining, month after month, and finally said no. We went over the head of Labor Relations to the Agency Commissioners and soon had a half dozen of them willing to commit publicly to their openness to an AWS program. Even so, we could not get anywhere with the Mayor's office and so we took the matter into impasse proceedings.

At impasse, the City "blinked" and allowed us a watered down pilot project at the Human Resources Administration and the possibility of more pilots elsewhere.

The results, up until the pandemic, were all positive, according to Agency reports. A major expansion was due this year in a number of Agencies, but all was changed by the plague.

On the positive side, the pandemic caused the rush hour crowd to diminish to the point where you could easily get a seat on the subway.

The only such time before this was back in the 1930's. We then could choose subway or elevated lines on Second Avenue, Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Avenues.

We had all the current lines plus the elevated lines. These had been almost full in the 1920's rush hours but, by 1930, you could easily get a seat. The loss of jobs had so reduced ridership that the City could begin to take down the Ninth, Sixth and Second Avenue lines without upsetting voters. They did promise a Second Avenue subway, but it did not occur at all until a short stretch was built recently.

The pandemic and the resulting City shut down was our second chance to ride a nearly empty subway during rush hour, but it was temporary and did not last.

The Coronavirus has forced our City to think "outside the box" in order to survive. We are "working from home" at greater rates than any of us previously imagined and Hospitals, as a matter of necessity, varied from their regular shifts from the start.

On our return to work it is obvious that we would all benefit from Alternative Work Schedules. Even if your job does realistically require you to be at your desk in the City at 9:00AM sharp, you will be happy if your subway car or bus is missing those workers who traveled earlier or later due to AWS.

If we start with white collar jobs in public employ, Accountants, Architects, Analysts and a host of workers who need little contact with the public, we will spare thousands or tens of thousands of riders. If our example is followed by the private sector, far more riders will be spared discomfort and actual danger.

Our first effort was to argue for a voluntary four day week where it made sense. Now, if we can survive this pandemic, we would like to suggest a three day voluntary work schedule for those jobs where it would make sense and the workers would agree.

The Organization of Staff Analysts will continue our advocacy of such a good and reasonable idea. We hope others will join us.

Work from home? Sure, when it makes sense and can be done well. In all other cases please consider AWS and help relieve the unnecessary suffering of the New York City rush hour. We owe it to our heroic brothers and sisters who maintain our public transit system to smooth the flow of passengers. We also owe it to each other.