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IN ORDER TO ENSURE RIDERS CONTINUED SERVICE, MTA CHALLENGES UNIONS TO SETTLE CONTRACTS BY NEXT WEDNESDAY

At 10:00 a.m. today, MTA's Chief Operating Officer Allan Lipsky made the following statement at MTA's Gateway Headquarters:

"Yesterday one of our unions, the bus drivers union (UTU), delivered a notice of intent to strike at the end of next week, and of course we are still operating day to day with the mechanics union (ATU). We are disappointed that the unions are again leaving our passengers, most of whom totally depend on our busses and trains to reach to their jobs, schools and medical providers – worried and angry.

"But we are not surprised.

"MTA unions have always waited to the last minute to make a deal. At the eleventh hour, the MTA has to consider the welfare of its riders and the public, while the unions only have to consider improvements for their already well-paid members. So there is always time at the last minute to address the benefits the union wants to add to its contracts, but never time to address the MTA's issues. We cannot allow that to happen in this round of negotiations – too much is at stake.

"So I am issuing this challenge to the union leaders. Let's set a goal of reaching agreement by 5:00 p.m. Wednesday, September 13th. I believe all we need is 48 hours of intensive bargaining to resolve all of the outstanding issues. So if we begin meeting again on Tuesday, we will have enough time. But the MTA negotiators are ready to get back to the table as early as 6 PM tonight.

"While I do not want to address any of the details of bargaining, which is going on behind closed doors, we are also prepared to demonstrate our good faith by immediately addressing one of the unions' most important issues – health care costs.

"Our unions already have some of the most expensive health care benefits in the country, with no employee contribution, no deductible, and no co-pay. The unions are asking the MTA to increase its payments by up to 20%. We agree the health care costs are rising and we are prepared to increase our payments if necessary. Union members do not have to worry about continued health care coverage as long as they remain at work.

"But we are entitled to accountability and we are entitled to responsibility. We want an accounting of the union trust funds, into which we pay over \$40 million of taxpayer money each year – an accounting we are entitled to under the union contracts, and which the union leaders refuse to provide, so that we can see how much of an increase is really necessary. And we want responsible management of health care costs to keep us competitive with other transit agencies.

"If we address this important union issue, we expect responses to fourteen productivity improvement proposals, which the unions still have not seriously considered.

"We welcome the assistance of the state mediators in this process. We hope that their presence will encourage the parties to reach a settlement as soon as possible.

"Unions: Let's get back to the table. Let's be professional. Let's be responsible. Let's be respectful of each other, but most of all our riders."