

Pregnant conductors challenge Metro-North over railroad's refusal to offer light duty

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Rockland/Westchester Journal News

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Pregnant Metro-North conductors say they're been denied light duty in the months leading up to their due date, even with a doctor's warning that the work could put their child at risk, union officials say.

Conductor Lindsay McLendon has been out of work since January after her doctor urged her to work light duty or risk complicating her pregnancy.

Six months into her pregnancy, McLendon, 31, remains at her Poughkeepsie home, unwilling to work in a job that would place her unborn child at risk. She's had to exhaust her sick leave and has applied for disability payments.

Her doctor told her she shouldn't lift more than 20 pounds and, after an hour's work, she would need to stay off her feet for 15 minutes. She says the railroad, without explanation, denied her request.



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“Our job is much more physical than people know,” McLendon said. “I would have taken anything they offered me honestly.”

“I’m not 100% disabled just because I’m pregnant right now,” she added. “I want to work. I enjoy my job. I want to be contributing to my household financially. I don’t enjoy being home full time.”

Conductor Liza Cruz-Camilo, 34, decided to take a less strenuous job as an assistant conductor after her bid for lighter duty was turned down.

That means no moving handicapped ramps or throwing switches – moving the heavy levers that guide trains onto other tracks – or making her way through crowded morning trains into Grand Central Terminal.

She estimates she’s losing roughly \$200 a week in pay.

“I love being a conductor and I love bringing my workers in every day, but I have to think about my child, too,” Cruz-Carmilo said. “It’s a very archaic system and I think the culture is you get intimidated to even ask. I think it discourages women from even trying.”

Their union, the Association of Commuter Rail Employees, has enlisted the women in a task force to get the railroad to adjust its current policy. They say they could work in training jobs or other assignments that are less physically demanding.

“Because of the lack of benefits, financially women are forced to work later into their term,” said Edward Valente, general chairman of the ACRE local representing conductors. “There’s no paid maternity leave, there’s no light duty, there are no reasonable accommodation – so it puts them at risk during their pregnancy.”

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Metro-North president Catherine Rinaldi said Thursday she plans to work with the union to resolve the dispute.

“As the first woman to lead Metro-North Railroad, ensuring opportunities for women has always been a core priority,” Rinaldi said. “We are looking at this issue and are open to discussions with ACRE in collective bargaining that would set aside certain positions on the extra list for pregnant conductors who have been advised by their physician to restrict certain physical activities.”

Conductors assigned to the extra list have the same responsibilities as fellow conductors but may not be assigned a train on a particular day, which would give them an opportunity for rest.

The women say their concerns were heightened last year when a New York City subway conductor suffered a miscarriage her union says was linked to her work duties. Since then, Transport Workers Union Local 100 negotiated with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority for an agreement that allows pregnant women with medical conditions to be assigned desk duty.

“It’s more anxiety-inducing than it is physically stressful, knowing a woman had a miscarriage throwing switches,” said Candace Clarke, a Metro-North conductor who’s five months pregnant. “That’s stuff that we do every day. You see horror stories like that, you double think everything you do.”



Valente would like his conductors to have accommodations similar to those given city subway workers.

“The railroad as a public authority, the MTA, should be a leader in paving the way for other businesses, public and private,” Valente said. “They shouldn’t be lagging behind the rest of the country that’s lagging behind the rest of the world on this issue.”

Bronx Assemblywoman Latoya Joyner, the chair of the Assembly's labor committee, has introduced legislation requiring that a light-duty option and parental leave be made available to railway workers.

“It is extremely troubling that Metro North is jeopardizing the health of hardworking women and placing their pregnancies at risk with such short-sighted practices,” Joyner said,

The ranks of women conductors have grown in recent years. Valente said there are currently more than 200.

But adjustments to life in a male-dominated profession haven't always been seamless.

In 2018, women conductors fought back after Metro-North imposed a rule requiring them to trim their fingernails to one-eighth of an inch above the tip of their finger. Some argued their fingernails represented one of the few ways they could express their femininity in a uniform styled for men.

McLendon says the railroad needs to catch up to the needs of its women conductors.

“The railroad tries to promote gender equality and women in the workforce,” McLendon said. “That’s great. We’ve come a long way from where we used to be, but on pregnancy and maternity leave the railroad is years behind where it should be.”



Cruz-Carmilo said the railroad, which has a woman president, needs to apply the same gender-equity to its conductors.

“I think in a day and age when our company president is a woman and the vice president of our country is a woman the policy should be more family-friendly,” Cruz-Carmilo said. “We shouldn’t have to feel like we have to choose between our careers and being a parent. Plenty of women have fought for those rights already.”

