

# New York subway fire exposes city's social and political crises

Alan Whyte  
4 February 2005

A January 23 fire in New York City's subway system resulted in a protracted disruption of service for more than a half-million passengers who use two 8th Avenue train lines, the A and the C, which run the length of Manhattan and into Brooklyn and Queens. The fire completely destroyed a relay room that controls the signals that make it possible for trains to move through the system without crashing into one another.

New York City Transit Authority President Lawrence Reuter originally told the press that full service would not be restored for three to five years. The news was met with shock and anger on the part of city transit riders. Transit officials subsequently told the media that it would take six to nine months to repair the two subway lines. One of the reasons for long delay is that the transit system's signal technology is more than a century old. Only two companies in the world are able to manufacture such equipment. As it turned out, transit workers working around the clock and getting whatever spare parts they could find were able after nine days to install a temporary signal system allowing the restoration of much of the service.

Nevertheless, it will still take many months to create a permanent signal system that will only allow trains to move in one direction. And it may very well take three to five years to fully restore the signal system, permitting more sophisticated movement of trains such as, when it is necessary, for trains to move in reverse.

The disruption has once again brought into focus the antiquated state of the system's signal system and the desperate need for its modernization. Indeed, two train disasters—one resulting in the death of six passengers in 1991 and other causing the death of a train operator in 1995—exposed the signals as unsafe. They do not protect trains from derailing over switches, as happened in the 1991 accident, or crashing into another train, as happened in 1995.

However, transit officials were far more concerned with finding a scapegoat for the fire than confronting the problems in the system. They immediately attempted to place the blame on a homeless person, saying that someone seeking warmth on a cold day had come onto the tracks near the locked facility and managed to set fire to wood inside a shopping cart.

New York City's Police Commissioner Ray Kelly debunked this theory, however, denying that the official investigation had

blamed a homeless person for the disaster. He explained that the cause of the fire remains unknown. He also emphasized that the police and the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) have a program to drive the homeless out of the subways, either by placing them in shelters or arresting them.

There is no question that homelessness is once again on the rise in New York City. There are now more than 36,000 people, including 15,000 children, in the city's shelters, the highest number since 1989. This figure includes more than 8,800 single adults compared to about 8,200 in 2003.

In the past, the homeless had sought to use the subway system infrastructure—including areas in underground tunnels—as shelter. In some areas, small shantytowns arose. The Transit Authority and the police mounted a campaign in the 1980s and 90s to drive the homeless out of the subways. This included the use of toxic chemicals in certain areas, rendering them uninhabitable, and totally sealing off other areas. Although it is perhaps impossible to determine how many homeless still enter the tunnels, certainly many of them during the cold winter months spend the night sleeping on trains or in stations until they are removed by the police.

Irrespective of what caused the fire, there are about 200 relay rooms throughout the subway, out of which more than 40 have no fire-retarding technology. The Chambers Street facility not only lacked sophisticated fire-fighting devices, it did not even have a simple smoke detector. This was the case despite a 1999 report recommending that both fire-stopping equipment and smoke-detecting devices that can be monitored at a central location be installed in all the relay rooms.

The MTA has spent about \$40 billion for repairs and upgrading throughout the New York subway system since 1982. Mass transit was tremendously underfunded during the economic crises of the 1970s when the city teetered on the brink of bankruptcy. As a result, in the early 1980s, the system had reached its nadir, with tracks throughout the system in such an advanced state of disrepair that trains were forced to move very slowly just to avoid derailing.

Although the major corporations based in New York City are among the principal beneficiaries of the public transit system, which delivers their employees to work, they essentially do not pay for it. The MTA's income comes from the fares it charges

passengers (which the agency now insists on calling “customers”), federal, state and city funding, and the issuing of bonds.

According to the Straphangers Campaign, a citizens’ group that advocates improved public transportation, the MTA has accumulated a debt of around \$22 billion on its bonds. In seeking short-term solutions for this debt crisis, the MTA has in recent years refinanced its loans, thereby deepening its long-term financial difficulties. Debt service is projected to increase from \$916 million in 2004 to \$1.7 billion in 2008. In terms of percentages, the MTA, which spent 12 percent of its total income for debt in 2004, will have to spend 20 percent in 2008.

The increase in debt is the MTA’s single biggest financial problem—it is three times greater than any other expense. As a result, the agency has projected deficits of billions of dollars over at least the next four years. To help pay for these deficits, it has passed a fare hike and has eliminated some token booths, a cutback that will go into effect later this month. It is also threatening to increase the fare again and make bigger service cuts in the years ahead.

Passenger fares cover a greater percentage of costs in the New York system than in any other large transit system in the United States. Meanwhile, not only does corporate New York enjoy the system’s benefits for free, but the major finance houses and wealthy investors are making money from brokering and collecting interest on these tax-free bonds.

The authority is seeking \$27 billion for a five-year capital program for the years 2005 through 2009. Approximately \$17 billion is for maintaining the system and the other \$10 billion for expansion. The expansion program includes the extension of the No. 7 subway line to the far West Side, which would coincide with the building of a sports stadium for the Jets football team.

While mass transit advocates have complained of insufficient funding from city, state and federal governments, it seems there is ample money when it comes to creating a new private sports facility. The city’s multibillionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg is trying to use \$600 million of city and state money to assist another billionaire, Robert Johnson, the owner of the Jets football team, in building a new 75,000-seat stadium. Many believe that if the deal goes through, the city and state will end up spending considerably more.

Elected officials who are pushing for the facility realize that it is necessary to extend one of the subway lines to the far West Side in order to service the stadium, which will not even have a parking lot. Yet the governor’s latest proposed budget provides the transit authority with about \$2 billion less than it needs just to maintain the current system for the next five years. MTA Chairman Peter Kalikow, who was appointed by the state’s Republican Governor George Pataki, has already made it clear that the MTA cannot undertake such an expansion project without additional funding.

Part of the land that the Jets need for this new sports facility

is on an MTA-owned rail yard. Though the MTA reportedly had assessed the value of the land at more than \$900 million, it has asked for only \$300 million to sell the property to the Jets. The Jets’ negotiators have argued that the land is almost worthless, offering only \$100 million. City and state officials have decided to side with Robert Johnson and the Jets in order to assist the owner, at the expense of mass transit.

Though austerity is the watchword for vital services needed by the city’s working people, when it comes to profit interests, no expense is spared. Just like the subway system, the city’s entire infrastructure including such things as water pipes, bridges and schools are in an advanced state of disrepair. Nevertheless, the mayor’s recent budget proposals cut \$1.3 billion for badly needed school construction projects.

The mayor’s proposed budget for this year contains an estimated \$500 million in budget cuts, including cuts in funding for libraries and after-school programs, and reductions in staff in firefighter companies, as well as cuts for numerous social service programs and cultural institutions. In addition, the mayor’s budget assumes that city workers’ wages will not keep up with the rising costs of living. The governor’s latest budget proposes a billion-dollar cut to Medicaid, the health program for the poor. While the governor is demanding more taxes and fees for working people, he is at the same time proposing tax relief for those with the highest incomes.

And just like the MTA, state is awash in debt; a just-published state comptroller’s report shows that New York State has increased its debt from \$14.4 billion in 1990 to \$46.9 billion in 2004. It is the second highest in the nation after California.

Just as the profit system has proven incapable of properly maintaining New York’s physical infrastructure, there is the connected issue of who will pay for all this debt. The answer is obvious. As with the city’s transit riders, who are forced to pay higher fares for reduced service while the bondholders make money, so are workers throughout the city and state being hit with budget cuts and other attacks on living standards.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**