

Amid massive security buildup in subways

New York City transit to cut conductor jobs

Alan Whyte
4 August 2005

According to a preliminary 2006 budget released by the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) last week, New York City subways will eliminate conductor positions in trains running on four lines. The job cuts are to hit the 7, N, J, and M lines, with 313 conductor jobs wiped out beginning in 2007.

The move marks the largest expansion of the authority's program entitled OPTO—One-Person Train Operation—since it was introduced nearly a decade ago. It is designed to cut costs in the face of mounting long-term debt.

While such cost-cutting and attacks on jobs have been the stock and trade of the MTA and other public agencies in the city and elsewhere, what is curious about this latest proposal is its unveiling in the midst of a massive security operation in the city's subway system. In the wake of the recent London train bombings, police have poured into subway stations conducting random bag searches, while other cops have been deployed riding the trains.

The transit authority's cutting the jobs of conductors runs directly counter to this purported preoccupation with public safety.

Currently, most trains are operated with two-person crews—the train operator and the conductor. The train operator is in the front of the train responsible for moving the train and concentrating on speed and navigating the signal system. The conductor, who is located in the middle of eight or 10-car trains, makes announcements on the train's public address system, and opens and closes the doors for passengers while the train is in the station. He or she is also responsible for observing the platform as the train moves out of the station to guarantee that there are no dangerous incidents such as a passengers being stuck in the doors.

Train operators and conductors, both of whom carry portable radios, are the first responders to any disaster in the subway. Both crewmembers are responsible and trained to work together whenever there are life-

threatening situations such as a fire and smoke conditions that might require an evacuation.

Such emergencies can take place in the most difficult environments, such as when a train is stuck in the underground and passengers must be taken out on dangerous and slippery catwalks or over roadbeds—where the electrified tracks are located. The emergency exits to the streets are no less treacherous, because some of them require climbing many steps only to exit doors that can sometimes be difficult to open.

Open-air evacuations can also be very dangerous due to gaps in the structure in many locations that make it possible for a passenger or employee to fall through to the ground below, causing serious injury or death. During the last power blackout affecting the entire Northeast, all trains came to a sudden stop, compelling crews to evacuate and safely bring passengers to the streets. While both crewmembers are responsible for the safety of the passengers, the conductor is usually in a better position to observe both inside and outside the train and interacts with passengers who may wish to report a dangerous situation.

Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the MTA has run an ubiquitous public safety campaign utilizing the slogan, "If you see something, say something." The message is that if a passenger sees something dangerous, he should report it immediately to a transit employee, such as the conductor.

Obviously, it is considerably more difficult for passenger to comply with this directive if there are fewer conductors with whom they can speak.

Also, the agency encourages its train crews to be on the alert for any potentially dangerous situations, in a program that it succinctly calls "Eyes and Ears" of the subway. Yet eliminating the conductor definitely removes the most crucial set of eyes and ears from the train.

For decades, all trains that carried passengers had two-person crews. However, as a result of concessions by

Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, which represents the approximately 34,000 New York City transit workers, it became possible in 1996 for the MTA to eliminate the conductor during the midnight hours and on short shuttle-train runs. Under these conditions, the train operator not only drives the train, but also must open and close the doors and make announcements to the passengers when the train has stopped at a station. However, the train operator cannot possibly observe the platform when the train is moving out of the station, as the conductor is required to do.

The conductor's function in this regard is particularly important in New York. Though there are a number of subway systems that were created for one-person train operation, such as Washington, DC, and Miami, all the station platforms in these cities are straight. Many of the platforms in New York, on the other hand, are curved, making it impossible for the train operator to see more than half of a full-length train in many stations.

Currently, there are seven lines that are operating without the conductor either on night and weekends, or on shorter shuttle trains all the time. Most recently, the conductor has been removed on the L line on nights and weekends. The transit authority has been building a new signal system and introducing new trains that allegedly would make it possible to eliminate the conductor on the L line altogether.

Faced with more than \$20 billion in debt, the MTA is eliminating conductor jobs no matter how critical they are to the safety and security of passengers. The authority anticipates saving \$20.5 million annually as a result of these cuts.

However, the agency managed to obtain an \$833 million surplus this year—around 11 times more than was originally projected. The authority has decided to use not a single penny of this surplus to save conductor jobs, but has indicated that it would dedicate the bulk of money to improving some of its real estate, which it maintains can then be better sold for a profit.

While the MTA institutes cost cutting, no expense has been spared to flood the subway system with police after the July 7 bombing of the London subway. After the failed attempted terrorist attacks in London on July 21, the police presence was greatly enhanced and random searches of passengers' bags and packages were initiated. If passengers refuse to be searched, they are not allowed to enter the system.

In a little more than a week, many thousands of passengers have had their bags investigated at more than

400 subway stations, and more than 20,000 other passengers have submitted to bag checks at bus terminals and commuter trains in the New York area. Civil liberties lawyers have charged that the practice constitutes a violation of the US Constitutional protection against unreasonable searches.

Since July 7, when a marked increase of police presence in the subways began, the city has been spending an estimated \$1.3 to \$1.9 million a week in overtime pay for cops. Despite the unprecedented scope of this operation, no weapons have been found and no arrests made.

However, in a July 24 incident, about 100 police officers—some carrying machine guns—surrounded and stopped a double-decker tour bus. About 60 tourists were told to put their hands above their heads and get off the bus. The action was taken after a supervisor for the company, Gray Line, called the police asserting that there were five men who appeared to have either Middle Eastern or South Asian background with backpacks on board. A ticket agent had believed they were acting “suspiciously.”

These five men, ages 22 to 40, were handcuffed, searched and forced to kneel on the sidewalk at gunpoint. As it turned out, they were not even carrying backpacks as reported. The police found nothing dangerous in their possession and, after questioning them, determined that they were merely sightseers from England of South Asian descent with absolutely no connection to terrorism. Mayor Michael Bloomberg felt compelled to issue a public apology for the action, while blaming the ticket-taker rather than the police for the massive overreaction.

The contradiction between the vast resources expended on an increasingly militarized police force and the cutting of budgets for essential personnel charged with safety on the subways is one more indication that the so-called “war on terror” is not about protecting the public, but rather justifying war abroad and police state repression at home.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact