

# Detroit residents protest cuts in bus service

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Thousands of Detroit residents attended public meetings last week called by the city to present its proposals for slashing bus services. The sentiment among residents is overwhelmingly hostile to any further service cuts, but Detroit Mayor David Bing has made clear that he is determined to lay off bus drivers and eliminate routes.

About 150,000 residents ride the busses every day in this beleaguered city. It is not unusual to wait at a bus stop for an hour or more, as service has been cut repeatedly.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* attended several of the meetings and spoke to city residents.

Several hundred residents crowded into a public meeting at the city's Northwest Activities Center on Thursday. The crowd cheered as angry residents repeatedly denounced plans to slash routes and terminate bus service on the weekend. One after another, speakers took the microphone to call for the mayor's immediate removal.

The stream of speakers detailed in moving terms the increasingly desperate conditions of workers, as well as disabled and elderly people who live in the city. Detroit is the poorest urban center in America. The official unemployment rate is 29 percent. In 2007, the most recent year for which figures are available, more than 33 percent of residents lived below the official poverty level. The real figures are much worse.

Large sections of the population cannot afford to own a vehicle, and depend on the busses, which are the only public transportation available. Most speakers at the meeting rejected the argument that there was no money for bus service. It is well known that city officials pour millions of dollars into salaries, perks and pet projects.

"Detroit is too big to have a bad bus service," said Toni Teresa. "They need to expand it," she added to loud applause. "They found money to renovate the auditorium at the City County Building. Why can't they find the money for the busses?"

Thomas A. Wilson, Jr., said, "I have been here since 1953, and I have never seen it as bad as it is now. Take the cars from the department heads and City Council members. That would save money. One hundred and fifty thousand people a day ride the bus. The very people who can ill afford it are

having the burden put on their shoulders."

Kay Thomas, a Detroit school teacher, denounced the proposed cuts as an attack on the 800 students at her school. She explained that she often had to take the bus herself because members of her family would need to use her car.

"You are cutting from the poor," Ms. Thomas said; "I don't think that is fair. You should look out for the working class. We sustain Detroit."

As an indication of the mayor's concern over growing hostility among workers toward his administration, his chief administrative assistant, Charles Beckham, was in the audience to observe and did not attempt to address the meeting.

Beckham's attitude toward those who did speak, however, was sharply exposed when a registered nurse who had been sitting near him at the back of the room challenged him from the microphone.

"Mr. Beckham," she said, "I am a registered nurse, and what we are saying is not 'nonsense.'" Her voice was controlled, but the deeply felt anger and frustration she shared with the overwhelming majority of those in attendance was unmistakable. "We are the citizens of Detroit. We have our rights."

Several union officials, including Henry Gaffney, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 26, which represents Detroit bus drivers, sought to defuse the situation, claiming that a victory had been won because Mayor Bing had agreed to postpone the cuts in service.

D'Artagnan Collier, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for mayor in the recent elections, warned those in attendance not to place any confidence in the union officials. "They are cutting a deal behind your backs to impose pay cuts, layoffs and cuts in service." Collier called on workers to organize rank and file committees to launch a campaign for a general strike throughout the Detroit area to oppose the cuts, plant closings and school closings.

The unions are tied to the city government and the Democratic Party, Collier said, and to fight these attacks workers have to break with the Democrats and conduct an independent struggle on the basis of a socialist perspective.

The cynical logic of the city's position was brutally clear.

The Obama administration had mandated that any disbursement of federal funds to address the massive deficits in the city budgets had to be met with matching funds from local sources. The cost of fuel, salaries and supplies had increased while revenues had decreased. Thus, city officials argue, the only choice left is massive cuts in services. The public outcry would only be considered from the standpoint of city officials calibrating where services could more easily be cut.

Earlier in the week, more than 100 people streamed into the La Sed Senior and Youth Recreation Center in southwest Detroit. The final speaker summed up many of the contributions Wednesday night, “This is total insanity. There is a girl who lives on my street who will have to walk three and a half miles to get to a bus. Now the bus stop is right in front of her house. No mayor has ever signed off on anything remotely like this. I think transportation is constitutional right. I say that when you start making these changes you have no idea what the impact is going to be down the road.”

Another speaker commented: “If we can live off \$25,000 a year in the city of Detroit, those people that make six-figure and up incomes can live off \$100,000. Let them take the cuts.”

Ms. Mallory said, “I work 5 to 6 days a week in retail. They don’t care how you get there, just so that you get there. If I have to catch a cab on Saturday or Sunday that is going to cost me an extra \$50 a week. That is an extra \$200 a month that I do not have. The Sunday cuts are wrong. I don’t know if you realize that the Grand River bus is full on Sunday at six, seven and eight in the morning. People are going to church and to work.

“Stopping Saturday and Sunday evening service when it is dark will be a big problem,” she added. “People still go to shop at malls and need the bus to get back from Northland and other malls in the suburbs. People have to survive. Life is priceless.”

The WSWS spoke to several residents attending the meeting. Bill Jordan said, “I came here because of the schools being cut and because I don’t think buses should be cut. People have to get home and that will cause great hardship if they cut the evening service.”

Later Jordan spoke at the hearing, saying, “These cuts are unfair. We are all suffering for all the people who stole the money like [former mayor Kwame] Kilpatrick and city council member Monica Conyers. I was surprised by everything they are doing. This is killing the city. We worked all the way from slavery to get something decent, so why come in and destroy at all? I am on disability; I’ve had

several heart attacks. I know what these people can do. I remember being drafted to go to Vietnam and was lucky I was never sent. I remember being picked up by the Detroit police and held to the floor with pistol to my head.”

Gregory Delano Nason outlined the effect of the cuts on families and the disabled. “You also got things like therapy you have to do on the weekend because the kids are in school during the week. I have a son with ADHD, and I have to schedule for doctors’ appointments and other things on weekends for him and for my other three kids. A lot of people are under medication and can’t drive at all. I have seizures so I depend on the busses.”

Geraldine Johnson, a city bus driver, told the WSWS, “I have worked for the Detroit Transportation Department for 13 years. I have been at all the hearings so far to voice my opposition. The hearings are being held because the city charter requires community input for changes like this. It is sickening that they have the meetings this week and the layoffs are tomorrow. It doesn’t give any time for people to adjust. At least 50 of the drivers that are being laid off tomorrow just got hired this year. They left jobs to take the position, and now they will be laid off. I never could imagine that this could happen. This is America, the land of opportunity. But even in America people need services.”

Following the meetings, Mayor Bing announced a temporary delay in layoffs and scheduling cuts. On Monday, however, he made clear that the cuts would go ahead despite the public anger.

Bing will announce his decision on September 10, and they will be implemented on September 26. They will be part of massive concessions the mayor is demanding from city workers, including a 10 percent cut in pay and the threat of at least 1,000 layoffs. “These are not going to be temporary layoffs,” Bing declared at a news conference on Monday. “I’ve got to reduce the workforce in the City of Detroit.”



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