

New York transit agency to impose drastic service cuts on workers and students

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The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), which provides subway, bus and commuter rail service for New York City and its surrounding area, voted last week to eliminate free student transit passes as part of a package of drastic service cuts aimed at closing a \$400 million deficit.

In New York City, the cuts include scrapping more than 20 bus routes and the reduction of dozens of others, plus the elimination of two train lines and the shortening of two more. Intervals between trains would be increased on nights and weekends. In the New York suburbs, major cuts are planned for the Long Island Rail Road and Long Island Bus. The Metro-North commuter railroad would lose eight daily weekday runs.

For riders, these cutbacks will translate into longer commute times, and trains and buses that are even more overcrowded.

The most outrageous of the proposed cuts is the elimination of the free Metrocards used by almost 600,000 students to get to school. They would be forced to pay half fare starting in September 2010 and then full fare by September 2011, ending a policy of providing full fare support for students that has been in effect since 1948. The authority projects that the elimination of the free passes would save it \$170 million a year. Full fare at current rates would amount to about \$700 a year for each child.

For all working class families this would be a major hardship. Families struggling to make ends meet on low wage jobs or where breadwinners have been thrown onto the unemployment lines would find it virtually impossible afford the fare imposed upon their children. The elimination of student passes will force many thousands of youth to choose between jumping the turnstiles or truancy. Others would at the very least lose the opportunity to study at schools further from their homes that provide special programs to meet their needs.

In a cruel attack on the disabled, the MTA voted to cut back on the door-to-door Paratransit service called Access-A-Ride. About 65,000 New York City residents use the service, and about half of them are 75 or older. The service provides more than 26,000 rides a day. Under the planned cuts, many will be driven to the nearest bus or subway stop instead of to their final destination.

These service cuts will take place at the earliest in June 2010 and are part of continuous attacks on the transit riders. They follow a fare increase of 10 percent in the city that was imposed

in May of this year, and will be followed by a fare hike of 7.5 percent that is already scheduled for 2011, and yet another fare increase that is scheduled to go into effect in 2013.

The proposed cuts require another vote early next year, after a public comment period. In the meantime, local and state politicians are squirming to evade their responsibility for these conditions, or posturing as outraged opponents of the cuts. What none of them will admit is that the fault for these draconian attacks on public services and social conditions lies with the whole system of private profit of which the Wall Street crisis is the inevitable product.

Democratic Governor David Paterson claimed that if the state revenues improve, he would consider helping to fund the student passes. However, a big part of the transit agency's deficit is the direct result of the state government's decision to cut its funding to the MTA by \$143 million. Part of this cutback was funding for the student passes. The state had previously contributed \$45 million. Earlier this year this was reduced to \$25 million, and in early December it was reduced yet again, to \$6 million.

The state's transit cutbacks are only part of Albany's onslaught on public services. Facing a budget deficit of \$6.8 billion and claiming that the state would soon run out of money, the governor has just withheld about \$750 million in scheduled payments for schools and home owners.

New York City's billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg called the Metrocard cuts for students "unconscionable." However, the city has also reduced its own contribution to student fares. In 1994, then Mayor Rudolph Giuliani sought to end the city's contributions entirely, but eventually agreed to a sharp reduction in funding.

Some Democratic Party politicians and the Straphangers Coalition, a transit advocacy group, have suggested that money be taken out of the capital improvement program and used to meet operating deficits. The capital program was beefed up in the first place because the transit system faced virtual collapse in the 1970s. The MTA already confronts a \$10 billion shortfall in its 2010-2014 capital improvement program. Robbing this program further would rapidly produce a return to the crises of the past.

Earlier this year, the state legislature enacted emergency

legislation, including a dedicated payroll tax, to assist the MTA. As a result of the deepening crisis, this tax is bringing in \$100 to \$200 million less than expected. The MTA's revenues are also heavily dependent on taxes on real estate transactions, which have been hard hit by the puncturing of the real estate bubble.

As Democratic Assemblyman Richard Brodsky acknowledged, "The MTA has become the first state agency to face the music of the national economic collapse. This is the opening refrain of a full symphony of pain that's going to hit other parts of the state next year."

The big business politicians have no answer to this crisis other than to make the working class pay. Transit workers, students and the riding public as a whole must foot the bill for the Wall Street meltdown, not only in the form of the taxpayer-funded bailouts, but also through cuts in public services.

The MTA employs about 70,000 people. Its nonunion workforce will be facing a 10 percent pay cut.

A state judge ruled just one week ago that unionized transit workers must be paid the 11 percent wage increase over three years that they had already been awarded by an arbitrator. The award was made in August of this year, but the MTA immediately contested it in court, claiming it was too generous, despite the fact that the deal will barely keep the workers even with the rising cost of living and the fact that it simply matched the raises that other city workers have already received.

The transit bosses are brazenly attempting to pit transit passengers against the workers. MTA board member Nancy Shevell claimed, "It is really unfair that one huge group is not going to be affected by the economic downturn and another large group, for example, our youth and our disabled and working people, are going to pay the price."

It is Wall Street, of course, and its political representatives, including the MTA board itself, who are not paying the price, while every section of the working class faces an enormous struggle.

The transit agency's chairman Jay Walder, who was picked by the governor for the position, spelled out his plans to attack transit workers, stating, "We need to take the place apart. We need to permanently change the way we do business." Walder called for the elimination of \$500 million in overtime and the layoff of 700 unionized workers. Transport Workers Union local 100, which represents 35,000 bus and subway workers, negotiated away their no-layoff clause protection in 2002.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to bus operators who work at the East New York bus garage about the service cuts.

Clive Ormsby, a bus operator for 16 years, said, "They cut service every pick. Instead, they should cut the big money managers who get paid \$100,000, \$200,000. What are they doing to deserve that money? Nothing.

"Now they want to take away the school passes. Do you think

they care if the kids go to school or not? No, they do not care.

"The mayor says that we do not deserve a raise, but how will I pay for the city's 14 percent increase in the water bill? While the workers in this city are suffering, the mayor has tripled his worth from \$5 billion to \$15 billion.

"They always are figuring how to make the workers pay. If the TA suspends me without pay, they save money by not paying me. Instead of giving trillions of dollars to the banks why don't they bail out working people?

"The politicians from both political parties are the same. They are both controlled by big money. If Obama didn't get a lot of money, he would not have gotten elected.

"I voted for Obama, but he is just another politician. Workers have no say in the government.

"They want to cut service and blame the deficit on us. They want to get the riding public against us.

"The reason all of this is happening is that our union leader [Transport Workers Union Local 100 President Roger] Toussaint chickened out and called off the 2005 strike. We should never have gone back."

Irvine Accosia, a bus operator for 4 years, told the *WSWS*, "They should not cut bus service, and they should not be giving these new \$40,000 hybrid trucks that the supervisors get. Management already gets paid a lot of money.

"These cuts will hurt a lot of people and their ability to get to different places. It is no fun waiting longer for a bus in the cold weather. People in wheelchairs especially will have a more difficult time.

"These cuts will drive people to use their cars more often, increasing both congestion and pollution.

"The billionaires who own the newspapers like to condemn transit workers and blame us for what is happening. They should work and have a salary like ours, and then we will see what they say."



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