New York City students protest scrapping of free transit fares

A reporting team
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Several hundred high school students, joined by teachers, parents and transit workers, demonstrated in Manhattan Monday against last week's decision by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to eliminate free bus and subway fares for nearly 600,000 students in New York City.

The demonstration was largely organized by the students themselves using the Internet and the social networking Web site Facebook. At the spirited rally in front of the MTA's Madison Avenue headquarters, they chanted slogans such as "no transportation, no education," and "we won't pay, MTA." Many held homemade signs bearing slogans that included "Bail out the students, not the banks," and "Don't take our transportation or our education."

The free student fare cards that the MTA has provided to New York's students for over 60 years are good for three rides a day, allowing students to make it from home to school and back and, if needed, get to sporting events or other extra-curricular activities. Paying these fares out of pocket would cost students and their parents at least $1,200 a year.

Given that the median income of families that send their children to New York City's public schools is $33,750, paying these fares out of pocket is simply unaffordable for a large section of the population.

While students from schools throughout New York's five boroughs participated, many of the demonstrators came from specialized schools—such as School of the Future High School and Fashion Industries High School—that draw students from across the city based upon their interests, even though it means traveling long distances.

Pat, a junior at Humanities Preparatory Academy in Manhattan, travels on the subway from her home in Brooklyn because she wanted to attend a smaller school that can provide "individual attention" and a more "healthy school environment." She explained that her father is currently unemployed and that her mother is forced to work two jobs just to make ends meet. Like other students at the rally, she protested that it was unfair how the system protects the interests of the rich at the expense of working people struggling to make ends meet.

The protest was ignited by the MTA board's 12-0 vote to force students to begin paying half fare by next September, and full fare by September 2011. Last October, as an example of a typical school-year month, the authority estimated that students made 7.3 million rides on trains and another 7.2 million rides on the buses. The transit agency claims that the cost of the program has increased from $162 million in 2000 to $239 million in 2008. This elimination of student passes that will be in effect, at the earliest, in June, is part a series of draconian service cuts.

In addition to scrapping the free student fares, the MTA also voted to eliminate two bus and two subway lines, to reduce service on other lines and to slash the Access-a-Ride para-transit system for the elderly and disabled. The cuts have to be presented at public meetings and will be voted on again early next year.

The MTA took these measures in order to cover a $400 million deficit in its operating budget. This financial crunch is a direct result of the Wall Street's financial meltdown, which slashed tax revenues for both the MTA as well as New York State, which provides a portion of its funding.

The New York state administration of Democratic Governor David Paterson cut its funding to the transit authority by $143 million, which includes the virtual elimination of Albany's contribution for the student passes. There have also been severe shortfalls in revenues stemming from payroll taxes and real estate taxes earmarked for the agency. (See New York transit agency to impose drastic service cuts on workers and students 21 December 2009).

Those most responsible for this crisis, the Wall Street banks that were bailed out with public funds, are now awash in $50 billion worth of profits and preparing to pay out a record amount in multi-million-dollar bonuses to the top financial executives.

No section of the political establishment even suggests that this windfall for the super-rich—paid for with tax dollars—be taxed at a higher rate in order to close the gaps in public budgets. Instead, the demand is that schoolchildren, working people, the poor, the elderly and the disabled be made to pay

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for the crisis through the reduction and elimination of vital public services.

The anger and resentment expressed by high school students at the rally is representative of the outrage felt by millions of New Yorkers over these drastic and provocative attacks. A number of students said that their teachers had let them out of class early so they could attend the rally. Others had walked out of school.

Henry Kaynes, 17, a senior at a specialized Bronx high school, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "The students at this rally today don't work yet, and so they can't afford to pay the cost of the fares. Most days I don't have enough money to buy my own lunch, let alone spend an extra $5 on rides to and from school."

Omar Shaquille, a ninth-grader at Humanities Prep in Manhattan, said, "I think we shouldn't have to pay for our MetroCard. A lot of people don't have enough money. They won't be able to go to school and get an education. Humanities Prep is a good school, and I would still be able to go to it if they make us pay for transit passes. But I wouldn't have enough money to eat lunch. A lot of students would also have to go hungry. This will make it very difficult to get a good education because I will be hungry, frustrated and unable to concentrate, especially in the afternoons."

Chelsea Silverman, a senior at Beacon High School in Manhattan, said that, while she will be graduating in June, she came because she knows that those in the lower grades coming from different parts of the city will face serious hardship and, in some cases, leave school altogether.

"One week when I lost my fare card and had to pay full price, I almost didn't make it through the week," she said. "These cuts will increase the dropout rate across the city. Beacon is a good school and people come from all over the city to attend. Only about half the students come from Manhattan. If people are forced to go to the local neighborhood schools, they will not get as good an education."

Toni Bruno, Chelsea's friend and classmate at Beacon, added, "There is a fundamental problem with the way money is allocated at the city, state and national level. I blame the MTA for the budget cuts, but the city and state are also responsible. Why don't they have plans for this? The students don't have a vote, so it makes it easier for them to cut us."

Adam Prouse, a ninth-grader attending School of the Future HS in Manhattan, told the *WSWS*: "It really isn't right. Cutting the MetroCard will make the schools more racially segregated, and poor kids will have to go to worse schools. I have to take a train, then a bus and then a train to go to School of the Future HS. I live uptown, but our students live all over the city. I won't be able to afford to go to School of the Future if they do this. I can't afford to go to private school, so I would end up going to a neighborhood school, which doesn't offer as good an education. A lot of students are in my position."

Behind the lines of picketing students stood a number of parents and teachers, who came to show support. Elaine, a teacher at the High School for Health Professions in Manhattan, spoke with the WSWS about the MTA cuts in relation to other recent attacks on public education.

"There's discontent on issues all around," she said. "We don't feel like good is being done for teachers or students. My classroom hasn't received a new desk or table for a long time. We barely have enough books in our school to meet the students' needs. Now, it's the MetroCards—it feels like it's something new being cut every week. There's no money put into the school environment, yet they're imposing all kinds of standards that don't help education progress. They're not giving teachers the real tools that they need to make students achieve.

"I think that it's not only an attack on students and teachers, but also an attack on parents. Parents aren't being listened to. Parents want smaller class sizes, but I really don't see this happening at all.

"They have the money for what they want, like more tests and surveillance in schools that are not high risk, but there's not enough money for the basics. It doesn't look like they have their hearts in the right place, if they even have them at all. I never really looked at it like that before, but after being a teacher for four years, it's become obvious."

While hostility toward the MTA was evident at the rally, some transit workers turned out to support the students. Lisa Lamar, a station agent, charged the MTA with trying to scapegoat its workforce in order to divert popular anger away from the real source of the proposed service cuts.

"The fact that the MTA made this announcement a day after [the Transit Worker's Union] won our arbitration, makes it look these cuts are happening because we got a raise, which is not the case," she said. "They're happening because of a mismanagement of funds. It has nothing to do with the wages that we were awarded, but they timed the announcement so that the public would think that *we're* the reason why their kids aren't riding for free anymore. I want to let everybody know that that is not the case."

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