

Chicago Transit Authority fires workers and cuts service

Kristina Betinis
11 February 2010

The Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) imposed layoffs and broad service cuts this week, in an attempt to plug a \$95.6 million hole in its budget and to force major concessions from transit workers. Just as the metropolitan area has been hit by the worst snowstorm of the season, commuters have been told to expect long waits and overcrowding on public transportation.

For several years the CTA has faced budget gaps, which have been growing exponentially over the course of time, with the fiscal crisis in the state of Illinois this year exacerbating the crisis.

Almost 1,100 workers—10 percent of the CTA workforce—have been fired. Nine express bus routes have been eliminated and service has been reduced on 41 others. Fewer trains will be running on 7 out of 8 lines, remaining bus service will be less frequent, and many routes will begin later and end earlier. In total, these measures constitute a 20 percent decrease in bus service and 10 percent decrease in rail service.

Many Chicagoans rely completely on public transit to get around the city. On the average workday, more than one million people use CTA buses and more than 640,000 ride the trains.

CTA President Richard Rodriguez has said riders should expect long commutes and to have to wait for several buses before being able to board due to overcrowding. Many train lines and bus routes were already operating at capacity before the cuts took effect on Sunday. These will be the worst affected, especially during rush hours.

The consequences of the service reductions for working people go well beyond the inconvenience of longer commute times. The *Chicago Tribune* published several interviews with residents in which they expressed the fear that their jobs are at risk if they are late to work due to public transit delays. Students are

worried about disciplinary action being taken against them if they fail to show up to school on time. And safety concerns have arisen since it became clear that high school students would be waiting longer to ride to school.

Suburban commuters are also badly affected. The CTA links to the suburban PACE system, which has eliminated fifteen routes and reduced service on nine others. Most of the affected routes went to Metra stations, the regional rail system serving six counties. Those who relied on PACE must find some other way to get to Metra stations.

The CTA, in alliance with Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, has sought to blame transit workers for the crisis. Since October of last year, the city has been in negotiations over the 2010 budget with the different unions whose members work for the CTA. Last Friday, in a move aimed at turning public opinion against the transit workers, Rodriguez made a public appeal asking for last-minute negotiations and insisting that transit workers are responsible for the severity of the cuts—that is, unless they concede to the CTA's demands for an indeterminate number of furlough days and the foregoing of a 3.5 percent wage increase.

While the two largest unions involved in the dispute—Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 241, which represents bus drivers, and ATU Local 308, which represents train operators—have sought to give the appearance of challenging the CTA's demands by calling for cuts in management staff to offset employee layoffs, they have already agreed to massive concessions.

Last Wednesday, ATU Local 241 proposed \$80 million in concessions, which was rejected by CTA management as inadequate. In response, the union has offered more givebacks.

According to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, currently the CTA “is going over the details of a \$90.6 million package of concessions proposed by the Amalgamated Transit Union Locals 241 and 308. The proposed concessions include a 10-day unpaid furlough for all union staff and a deferral of pay raises through 2013.”

ATU Local 308 President Robert Kelly has admitted that the sticking point with the CTA is not whether, but how layoffs will be carried out. He said, “The ATU locals always understood, unfortunately, that our members would be laid off and our dispute was only about using seniority with the CTA to determine who would be laid off first.”

While many CTA workers called in sick on Monday, the union has taken no action to oppose the mass layoffs.

A strike vote scheduled for Wednesday has been called off. As the ATU locals remain in negotiations with the CTA, the union leadership is determined to prevent any discussion of the character and scale of the concessions contracts they are in the process of working out with the city.

ATU Local 241 President Darrell Jefferson has already made it clear that the union entirely accepts the claim that there are no resources to pay transit workers decent wages or to provide the public with adequate services. He insisted that the mayor, with whom the union has longstanding ties, “told us the reality of it: that there’s nothing on the table, there’s no money there, the economy’s bad.”

Neither transit workers nor the public should believe any claim by the unions that they will secure a deal that significantly scales back the draconian job cuts and service reductions just introduced in the CTA. Rather, whatever agreement is reached will result in a permanent worsening of conditions in Chicago’s public transportation system, while the union will insist that there was nothing more they could have done and work hand-in-hand with the city to enforce cuts.

the **wsws.org/contact**



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit: