

For a socialist policy to defeat the attacks on mass transit!

Socialist Equality Party
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New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority is preparing to adopt a savage round of service cutbacks and new attacks on the jobs and wages of transit workers, adding to the suffering in the midst of the biggest economic slump since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Among the cuts proposed are the elimination of more than 20 bus routes, reduction in service on dozens of others, planned cuts for the Long Island Rail Road and Metro North commuter rail system, and the elimination of free transit passes for almost 600,000 students. The MTA has just announced that 450 station agents, members of Transport Workers Union Local 100, will be laid off, along with 600 non-union administrative employees.

These attacks are only the beginning. The MTA has just declared that its budget deficit has doubled to \$800 million. The state government in Albany, itself facing fiscal disaster, has already cut its contribution to the public transit system in the New York metropolitan area. Payroll tax revenue earmarked for the MTA has been hammered by the crisis. Ridership is down steeply, as New York's unemployment rate has risen to 10.6 percent, with no sign of improvement in sight. Transit fare increases of 7.5 percent are already scheduled for 2011 and 2013, on top of the 10 percent increase last May, but there is already talk of another possible increase this year, or making next year's hike bigger.

The MTA is holding a series of mandated public hearings in March. No doubt these hearings will reflect the anger of millions of New Yorkers over the planned cuts, but history demonstrates that the board members, political appointees who obediently carry out the instructions of Wall Street and its political representatives like billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg, will barely go through the motions of hearing out their critics. The real decisions are made behind the scenes, and in broad outline have already been agreed upon. If the board alters any of its proposals, it will only be a tactical move to pave the way for deeper cuts in the future.

The Democratic and Republican parties are united behind

the MTA's attacks. Democratic Governor Paterson and Republican-turned-Independent Bloomberg each demand that the working class pay for the crisis. Under Paterson the state reduced its contribution to MTA finances by \$143 million last December, including a reduction of its funding of student passes from \$25 to \$6 million. In his latest budget proposal, Paterson offers to restore the \$25 million, still down from the previous level of \$45 million. The MTA says it needs \$214 million for the student passes, however.

It was Paterson who only recently came to the defense of the Wall Street bankers and their multimillion-dollar bonuses, declaring that Wall Street is "the engine of our economy in New York" and echoing Bloomberg's unvarnished contempt for the working class.

In a cynical effort to divide working people, the MTA is now blaming transit workers for adding \$91 million to the agency's deficit because a state judge ruled late last year to uphold an arbitrator's award providing for a very modest 11 percent wage increase over three years.

What more proof is required of the role of these politicians and the parties they represent? They insist there is no money for the most basic services or meager wage increases for transit workers, but there are literally trillions for the insatiable profit needs of the banks.

The strategy of the ruling financial elite is spelled out in a recent document issued by MTA Chairman Jay Walder, who Paterson appointed last October. Entitled "Making Every Dollar Count," this reactionary manifesto outlines a plan to reduce the workforce and increase productivity by using what is called "new business models and cost-saving tactics."

"The relationship between the MTA and its seven operating agencies should read like a classic tale of mergers and acquisitions," writes Walder. "In the private sector when companies are merged, there is an intensive review to eliminate redundancies and work that is no longer necessary given the new company's structure. At the MTA, this review never occurred."

The MTA intends to take its cue from the ruthless record of mergers and deregulation that has eliminated millions of decent-paying jobs in US industry over the past two decades. Walder has talked of eliminating “archaic work rules” and reducing \$500 million in overtime. He seeks to force all nonunion employees to take a 10 percent pay cut. The just-announced layoffs would be the first ever, and are legally possible only because TWU Local 100, representing 35,000 workers, negotiated away its no-layoff clause protection back in 2002.

Walder’s plans are part of a concerted drive to undermine all social and public services. Where immediate privatization is not yet politically possible, the ruling establishment seeks to undermine public services from within.

The campaign for a “business model” in the New York transit system is the counterpart to the push for charter schools and the destruction of what remains of the public health system. Everywhere the aim is to “wean” these vital public services from their reliance on public spending, which the crisis-ridden system can no longer afford. The result will be more unemployment, more poverty and reduced public services.

The Transport Workers Union, like the AFL-CIO of which it is part, functions as an integral part of the profit system and, through its support for the Democratic Party, refuses to fundamentally challenge the big business priorities of the government.

“Militant” oppositions within Local 100 that base themselves on the existing trade union set up and its alliance with the Democratic Party reveal themselves as no alternative at all once in office. The recent elevation of Local 100 ex-President Roger Toussaint into the ranks of the TWU international bureaucracy is only the latest example of this predictable path.

Meanwhile, newly elected Local President John Samuelson has indefinitely postponed the scheduled TWU mass membership meeting, and has joined with a number of elected politicians in support of a reactionary proposal to take money out of transit’s capital improvement program and use it for the operating budget.

In fact, the capital spending is urgently needed, and such a stop-gap remedy would at best only postpone the immediate cuts, while preparing deeper ones in the next year’s budget.

The only way to fund a modern transit system in the interests of society as a whole is through an economy that begins from the needs of the vast majority and not the profit interests of the few. The resources exist, but under the present system they are monopolized by tiny handful and subordinated to the creation of profit.

A new strategy is needed to defend public services and social conditions. Transit and other city workers must unite

with students and all working people in a political struggle against the parties of big business, which are carrying out these attacks on behalf of a bankrupt system that demands the working class pay to prop up the banks.

Millions of workers and youth are disgusted with the financial parasites. They have seen that Wall Street is not the “engine” of the economy, but the engine of their own impoverishment. Yet both political parties are unwavering in their support for the interests of the ruling elite.

An independent mobilization of the working class is required. Mass action, including demonstrations and strike action, will be needed, but this struggle must be guided by a political strategy based on the building of a new party of the working class and the fight for a socialist program.

The multi-million-dollar bonuses and salaries of Wall Street bankers and the immense amounts of wealth that they have appropriated to themselves through forms of financial speculation that are socially destructive and often criminal in nature must be recovered through a drastic increase in taxation on the top 1 percent.

The billions of dollars made available through such a policy can pay for a free mass transit system and put unemployed workers and youth to work in its modernization and expansion to meet the needs of the people.

The banks themselves and the major corporations must be nationalized and placed under the democratic control of working people in order to break the stranglehold of the financial oligarchy over society and direct social resources to the ending of unemployment and the improvement of living standards and vital social services, including education, health care and housing, for all.

The Socialist Equality Party fights for this program and policy, and we urge all those who are seeking a way to defeat the relentless attacks on living standards and basic rights to join us in fighting for a new socialist leadership of the working class.

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