

New York judge temporarily delays mass transit layoffs

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A New York judge issued a court order early Thursday morning temporarily delaying mass layoffs of station agents in the New York City transit system.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), which runs the buses and trains in New York City and the surrounding area, had mailed out nearly 500 layoff notices to station agents throughout the city, telling them to turn in their badges and uniforms and to attend an exit session that was scheduled to take place on Thursday. The layoffs were to coincide with the closing of about 70 station booths.

However, at around 2 a.m. Thursday, Manhattan Supreme Court Justice Alice Schlesinger issued a temporary restraining order preventing the layoffs for the time being. The judge agreed to hear further arguments from Transport Workers Union Local 100 that the MTA had failed to hold a sufficient number of public hearings before implementing its job-cutting plans.

Late last month, the MTA had filed legally required documents with the New York State Labor Department asserting its intent to carry out hundreds of layoffs.

While union lawyers are seeking to make the injunction permanent, the transit agency voiced confidence that the legal maneuver would pose no more than a momentary hurdle. The MTA issued a statement declaring, "Once this legal matter has been resolved we will proceed with the planned layoffs of the Station Agents."

In addition to the station agents, layoffs are slated on June 27 for more than 550 city bus workers, which is about 5 percent of the city's 12,000 bus operators. Another 122 city subway workers, mostly car inspectors, are scheduled to lose their jobs on July 4. Six hundred administrative workers will be also cut through a combination of layoffs and buyouts.

The layoffs, which are supposed to save the authority about \$65 million a year, are part of a sweeping package of job and service cuts designed to close an \$800 million budget deficit.

The cutbacks were announced following a series of legally mandated public hearings in March and a vote by the MTA board. The service cuts include the elimination of two subway lines and the merging of a couple of others; as well as the elimination of 34 bus routes, and reduced service for dozens of others.

The Long Island Railroad will reduce service on several of its lines. The Metro-North Railroad, which covers New York City's northern suburbs and Connecticut, will also have less train service.

There will also be a reduction of service for disabled riders.

These service cuts are scheduled to go into effect on June 27 and are supposed to save the authority \$93 million a year. The transit agency is also challenging the last year of an arbitrator's award that provides unionized transit workers with an 11 percent wage increase over three years.

The deficit has been caused by the continuously worsening economic downturn. In addition to the state's reduction of \$143 million in its contribution to the MTA, it has been estimated that a special payroll tax that was enacted for the authority has produced 25 percent less in revenues than originally projected. The state comptroller has determined that the increase in unemployment in the area has also created a dramatic decrease in ridership, costing the transit authority more than \$100 million in revenues last year.

The MTA had already imposed a 10 percent fare hike in May of last year, and is reportedly considering a 7.5 percent increase in 2011.

The agency has postponed a decision until June on one of its most controversial proposals: the elimination of free subway and bus passes for almost 600,000 students—a right that has existed in New York City since 1948. If passed, it would save the MTA about \$214 million a year, to be paid for by the parents at the rate of approximately a thousand dollars per child each year.

The response of Transport Workers Union Local 100, which represents about 32,000 New York City bus and subway workers, was spelled out in a statement given by the union's president, John Samuelson, to the city's weekly civil service newspaper the *Chief-Leader*. "While declining to discuss specifics," the paper reported, Samuelson "said he had offered senior MTA officials 'one-time fixes that would get them through 2010 and give them the equivalent savings they would achieve with layoffs.'" The article added that management transit officials, while not turning down the union offer, were looking for recurring savings.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed station agents and bus operators who attended a rally against the layoffs on the evening of May 4.

The featured speaker at the rally was Jesse Jackson, who joined with other Democratic politicians in issuing empty statements opposing the layoffs and urging workers facing the loss of their jobs to "keep hope alive." The Local 100 union bureaucracy has backed both Democratic and Republican politicians, who in turn supported the bailout of Wall Street, which is now being paid for through the massive cuts in mass transit and other vital social

services.

One of the workers attending the rally, Melissa Cruz, a station agent for four-and-a-half years, told the WSWS:

“I got a letter saying that I should show up Thursday to give up all my TA things. I feel devastated, heartbroken and angry. They tell us that we are the eyes and ears of transit, and now they are getting rid of us.

“We are the ones who can see an incident or prevent one from taking place. I have witnessed fights and assaults. Half the cameras that they have on the system do not work. They can do absolutely nothing to deter crime.

“I have helped sick passengers—some serious cases of people with chest pains. One time, a female came to me for assistance after having been on a three-day drug binge. She really needed help. She asked me to call the police and the ambulance, which I did.

“There are more typical day to day events when people ask me for directions. The tourists in particular need help in getting around. I can’t tell you how many times tourists expressed gratitude to me for helping them out.

“The cutbacks of station agents will be devastating to the people who ride the system. It is very confusing on the weekend when they change all the schedules due to track work.”

Debra Spicer, a station agent for 25 years, said, “These cuts are terrible and really sad. I believe that there are more to come. They are closing almost 100 booths to see how much more they can cut.

“The union should never have given up the no-layoff clause. The TA has plans to privatize the cleaners’ jobs so that they can hire lower paid cleaners with no health benefits.

“The TA is cutting these jobs for the money. I believe that with these cuts, people’s safety is endangered. This to me is more important than the money that they save. They are always taking it out on the working people and never management.”

Anthony, a station agent for 12-and-a-half years, told the WSWS, “We work under terrible conditions. During the weekend there are a lot of service changes. The passengers cannot possibly understand the platform announcements. The passengers come to us for help, but frequently the TA supervisors don’t even tell us about the schedule changes.

“I know a couple of people who are getting laid off. A friend of mine just got married, got a house and had a baby in the beginning of February. And now she is out of work. What is she supposed to do?

“This is a terrible time to lose one’s job. The laid-off station agents are going to this meeting on how to write resumes and things like that. What good will it do when there are no jobs out there?

“The banks are buddies with the government. Former Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson gave the banks \$800 billion, and they didn’t even have to say what they would do with it. He used to be the head of Goldman Sachs, and they were on the frontline to get a

bailout and big bonuses.

“When it comes to the money, Obama is no different from any other politician. He makes a great speech, but he is not doing anything for working people. There is no difference between the Democrats and Republicans. We should have our own party. A lot of workers would be in favor of it, especially those who are getting laid off. The union leaderships have always endorsed the Democrats without asking the union members.

“This is a lame union. I have no confidence that the union will do anything. I just came to see what this rally is all about. Jesse Jackson is the biggest crumb of them all. He is here to pick up the scraps. He has been doing that for years.”

Mrs. Thomas, a bus operator for 10-and-a-half years, said that she fears she may be among the next group of workers to receive a layoff notice.

“There is no security for working people,” she said. “What are they doing with all the money?

“All the buses are filled to capacity. They want to increase the fare. They are robbing everybody. How much more can people take?

“The buses will be more crowded. A bus operator got assaulted because he told the passengers to stand behind the white line, which is required by federal law. The drivers will get the brunt of the grief because the more crowded buses will make the passengers more upset.

“One half of the buses are not safe. I have a back problem because my bus hit a pothole. This job is not safe. My husband is a track worker. One track worker just recently got electrocuted, and before that two track workers were hit by trains.

“I work a 3 a.m. to 12 noon shift. I risk my life every day. Recently, a drunk got on my bus harassing me and all the passengers. My daughter is a bus operator, and she is off work due to an assault.

“We suffer from high blood pressure, diabetes, back, knee and neck injuries, all from this job. When you get removed from the job for sickness they harass you. If you are out a lot they can say that the employee is chronically sick for which they will fire you.

“Why are the banks getting bailed out? We are suffering and they get money for bailouts and war. But there is no money for workers and mass transit.

“The MTA doesn’t care about the people. Everything in this system is focused in the interests of the people who have the money.”



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