

# Pittsburgh bus drivers protest state budget cuts in transit

A WSWS reporting team  
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More than 600 workers and young people came to the march and noon rally on Saturday, March 19, in the Squirrel Hill section of Pittsburgh to protest planned transit cuts.

The Port Authority of Allegheny County will cut 29 routes completely on March 27, and 13 routes will see their weekend service eliminated. Night and evening service will also be reduced in most areas. Thirty-five communities in and around Pittsburgh will see reductions in bus service of about 15 percent. The whole area will see a reduction in service that equates to 13,000 fewer rides per day, or about 5 percent of total riders.

The Harmar bus garage will be closed. Twenty-six Allegheny Valley bus routes and 164 buses are based out of the Harmar maintenance and storage garage off Freeport Road along the Allegheny River. When the Harmar garage is closed, buses serving Allegheny Valley would come from other facilities, the nearest being in the East Liberty section of Pittsburgh and Ross Township.

In addition, 200 to 300 transit workers will lose their jobs. Fares were raised January 1 to \$2.25 for base fare and \$1 for transfers. Zone 2 riders have to pay \$3 a ride and light rail fares increase to \$4 during peak commuter hours.

In the past few years, the Port Authority has cut and reorganized service several times, resulting in an overall 20 percent reduction in service. Towns such as Port Vue and Glassport will lose their bus service entirely.

The cuts will especially hit the elderly, poor and low-income workers who cannot afford cars or the high cost of parking and gas. Many shift workers will be left stranded as night service is being curtailed.

Both Democratic and Republican politicians are responsible for these cuts. They are being made to cover a \$47 million deficit created when Pennsylvania's Democratic governor, Ed Rendell, and state lawmakers failed last year to fund mass transportation.

Pennsylvania's new governor, Republican Tom Corbett, presented his first budget earlier this month calling for \$1.5 billion in cuts to public education and, like his predecessor, failing to fund public transportation.

The Port Authority had been planning a 30 percent cut in transit, but just before leaving office, the Rendell administration moved \$45 million in unspent federal stimulus funds to the authority. The use of those funds has created a split between the Port Authority Board and Amalgamated Transit Union Local 85, which represents the transit workers.

The Board voted to expend the funds over 18 months, requiring a 15 percent reduction in service. The union proposed the funds be spent to prevent any cuts for six months, with the hope that additional funding will be found later. In 2008, the union gave over \$53 million in concessions, including cuts in benefits, pensions and wages.

Authority officials blamed the cuts on declining state funding, including a \$7.4 million drop in revenue from state sales taxes and \$27.3 million meant for capital improvements from tolls the state proposed for Interstate 80 last spring. The federal government did not approve the state's plan for the tolls.

While the board makes cuts to mass transit, they have also approved allowing private companies to cherry-pick the most profitable routes. This week the board approved Lenzer Coah to operate along two of the routes that were eliminated. The private company will operate only four trips on one of the routes and five on the other, with no service on the weekend. Fares will soar to \$10.00 for the round trip, with passengers required to buy weekly passes.

"It's horrible," said Teresa Brown, who lives in Port Vue and takes the bus in each day to work in downtown Pittsburgh. "I don't have a car. How am I supposed to get to and from work? I will have to walk over a mile and a half to get to the bus station in McKeesport. I have two

kids. This is going to make my day that much longer. I will have to find someone to watch them the extra time and by the time I get home I will be too tired to spend time with them.

“I am young and healthy, but what are the elderly people supposed to do who need the bus to go shopping, or visit relatives? In our town it is hilly and the streets don’t have sidewalks. In the winter with the snow and ice it will be real hard for people to get into town.”

“I think the buses need to be added to, not cut,” said Jim Walker, who lives on the North Side. “Parking is \$10 or \$12 a day for a cheap lot. The buses are so crowded now that after the cuts people will be left at the stops and won’t be able to get to and from work. They are spending all this money to dig a tunnel under the river just to extend the subway to the casino. They should have used that money to improve public transit for everyone.”

Many bus drivers at the demonstration expressed their frustration with the cuts. Greg, with 13 years at the Port Authority, said, “Public transportation is a necessity. It’s for many the only way of getting around. People in the waterfront, McKeesport, Glassport and Port Vue are having their service cut altogether.

“People are losing their jobs because they can’t get to them due to the cuts. This is ridiculous. They tried to privatize bus service here 40 years ago. They couldn’t make it work; it wasn’t efficient. They lost money.”

Andre, who has worked as a driver for 12 years, said, “They took the transit out of Port Authority Transit. This is not about the people anymore. They are getting rid of public housing, developing the hill and running people to the outskirts of Pittsburgh where there is no bus service. The question that people need to be asking is why they are being displaced to places where there is no service.

“We were told two years ago that our concessions would go a long way to saving PAT. They want us all to make \$10 an hour today as they are taking away our rights as workers. Coming from Pittsburgh, where there were great struggles in steel and in the Mon Valley, this shouldn’t be happening. We shouldn’t have forgotten those struggles.”

Rusty, who has worked at PAT for five years, said, “I’m wearing my Wisconsin T-shirt because I support them. It’s the same all over the country. The government and the companies say there is no money, but their salaries continue to increase. My wife has lupus. Without my benefits she would die. It seems to me that the politicians and the fat cats are pushing the people to revolt, towards a revolution. There’s no doubt about these

politicians being no different.

“My college age daughter put a post on her Facebook page that read ‘Republicans=elimination of the working class.’ I responded, ‘politicians=elimination of the working class.’ I left a good job with benefits, but that was harder labor and I’m older. I wanted to be able to take care of my wife and myself better. I had a good job with benefits, and now this.”

Patty and Rose, both with 21 years service, described their attempt to meet with County Executive Dan Onorato, a Democrat: “We went to Onorato’s office after our last rally to give him the 10,000 postcards from people demanding that service not be cut. He ran from us like the rat he is. The television station came and he locked himself in his office. When they left he came out and said that we could talk to him. He smirked the whole time we tried to talk to him and said, ‘There is nothing I can do.’”

David Powell, retired after 25 years with PAT, told the WSWS, “This is injustice for the working man. We know they have the funding to keep it going. They are trying to make it a private profit-making enterprise and it was never meant to be. Three county commissioners set it up. Now Dan Onorato is the only one making the decision.

“The home rule charter was changed to create the position of a county executive. There is no reason for one man to have that much authority. We don’t have freedom, and we don’t have democracy. They are even attacking teachers. So they’re telling us there is no need for an education. Just go to work for whatever they’ll pay you.”



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