

Regional cuts intensify Detroit transportation crisis

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With the city of Detroit's bus system in a state of virtual breakdown on a daily basis, the implementation of the cuts Monday by SMART, the regional transportation system for southeastern Michigan, will deepen the hardship of the 40,000 people who rely on it every day to get to work, school and medical facilities.

Despite vocal opposition from transit users at several public hearings in the metro Detroit area, since the cuts were announced several weeks ago 15 weekday bus routes were eliminated. (See "Strong opposition to Detroit suburban bus cuts") Routes that travel into Detroit and Highland Park during what are deemed "off peak" hours are shortened, forcing riders to transfer to Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) buses. In addition, several weekend routes will be eliminated. The cuts will result in 123 layoffs in the SMART system.

Riders will be offloaded into the DDOT system, which is already severely overtaxed, running with an average of 100 short of the number of buses needed on the streets every day to keep them running on schedule, according to Detroit Mayor Dave Bing.

The buses run so poorly that many riders are already forced to wait two to three hours to catch a bus. The shortage of serviceable buses because of the aging fleet and the inadequate maintenance manpower means that close to half of the DDOT's 438 buses are waiting for repairs.

The number of bus mechanics has fallen to 148 from 210 just two years ago due to layoffs, attrition and the refusal of the Bing administration to replace retired mechanics. In addition, those remaining are faced with furlough days and the elimination of overtime. With a fleet averaging 7.8 years old, more rather than fewer service hours per coach are required.

Last year, \$10 million in cuts in DDOT were forced

through by the city. In the face of this objective crisis, Bing is conducting a vendetta against "underperforming" mechanics by issuing ultimatums and threatening firings.

Conditions in the DDOT bus system have generated tensions and led to incidents on the buses like one that occurred last month, which led to a one-day job action by drivers. (See "Detroit bus drivers stage one-day strike")

The new cuts in the SMART system will hit riders the hardest who reside in Detroit and use the buses to travel back and forth to their jobs in the suburbs. The hours now designated as "peak"—between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m. and between 3 a.m. and 6 p.m.—are the only hours that remain unchanged. Outside of those hours, riders will have to transfer to or from a DDOT bus, which could jeopardize workers' ability to get to work on time or get home from the job before late in the evening. Workers who work any time other than the day shift face an impossible situation.

Reporters from the WSWs interviewed SMART bus riders at the Rosa Parks transportation center in Detroit.

Mike Avanzini, an environmental engineer who works in Detroit and commutes to the suburbs, said, "We don't have enough buses here. I come from New York City. I am used to having trains buses, and cabs. I have relied on these buses since I moved here.

"I rely on it. I don't understand why they don't expand it. There are people who depend on the bus a lot more than I do.

"After rush hour they no longer come downtown. I am not looking forward to having to hop on a DDOT bus if I have to work late. Fortunately, the bus I rely on hasn't changed, but I am sure a lot of people are complaining.

"This is my take: the auto industry has had a hand in

squashing public transit. They want people to drive.”

Ashley Boykin is a student at Wayne State University in Detroit. She said, “I don’t like it. I had to change my bus route. I have to catch the 610 between 3 and 9 p.m. and sometimes I get off work later. I work on the WSU campus and I had to change my work schedule.

“There seem to be a lot of people on the bus. They say people aren’t using it. I disagree with that, it is really unfair.”

Jake, a student at Cass Tech High School in Detroit, said, “I had to change the time of day I took the bus. I have to wake up earlier just to get to school.”

Jim, a resident of Macomb Township, said, “It doesn’t affect me because the buses run when I need them. The severest cuts are affecting Detroit. There are also routes in the suburban lines that have been eliminated, as well as weekend service. That will impact a lot of people. I thought I would never see it.”



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