

More drastic service cuts hit Detroit public transportation

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Another round of devastating cuts in bus service went into effect on Saturday, April 28 throughout the city of Detroit. The cuts will sometimes double the scheduled time between buses on over thirty routes in the city. Just two months ago, another series of cuts eliminated several bus routes outright. All overnight service in the city of 750,000 was ended.

Also, at the end of last year, the suburban bus system (SMART) made its own series of fare hikes and service cuts. One measure directed drivers to drop off all their passengers and turn around at the Detroit city limits rather than continue their express runs into the city center during nonpeak hours.

Earlier this year, Detroit Mayor Dave Bing turned management of the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) buses over to a private company which installed Ron Freeland as CEO of the system. Bing announced last week that he intends to privatize the entire public transportation system in Detroit as part of his budget for the next fiscal year. The DDOT budget for next year will be \$43 million—down from \$55.6 million this year.

The new private management has demonstrated that systemic and wide-ranging cuts that threaten the fundamental right of workers to decent public transportation will now continue apace. During the initial months of the new company's reign, passengers have been largely in the dark about changes to daily bus service. These changes seriously undermine the daily functioning of the city and of individual workers lives.

Hundreds attended earlier federally mandated service change hearings to speak out about preceding series of cuts. They expressed anger that the meetings were not properly publicized. Because there was so little notice, only a few dozen people attended the April meetings compared to hundreds at every other venue. When major public transportation cuts began in Detroit in the fall of 2009, police were called to patrol the meetings as hundreds of Detroiters opposed the cuts at hearings held in four parts of the city.

Opposition by riders of suburban and city buses built to a crescendo last February. Frequent breakdowns and an aging fleet continue to leave scheduled bus runs unfilled, creating long waits for buses. Even before the March cuts, and in the

bitterest part of the winter, passengers reported waiting as long as three hours for a bus. The already impossible situation was made worse by a new round of official schedule cuts. Now, two months later, more cuts are set to go into effect.

Residents are right to charge that their democratic rights had been undermined by new management's failure to advertise these meetings. More than one-third of Detroit households rely on the bus for transportation because their income is too low or car insurance too costly in the inner city for them to own a car.

Among the changes Freeland has implemented is his "415 Plan," this was touted to local press as an improved use of resources that would provide service every 15 minutes weekdays from 6 a.m to 6 p.m on the four bus routes that carry the majority of riders. These are Dexter Avenue and Grand River on the west side of town, Gratiot on the east side and Woodward Avenue. Previously, there were actually many more buses on these routes, with coaches scheduled every 8 to 12 minutes in most cases, depending on the route and the time of day.

Altogether, the new plan imposed this week increases the times between scheduled buses on the more than 30 bus routes in the city. The increases are substantial. For example, on the Vernor route, which serves Southwest Detroit, the times between buses will increase to sixty minutes at all times of the day. The Clairmont bus will only run every 80 minutes all day for service east of Woodward.

Freeland has said bus breakdowns have decreased by 42 percent and more buses are leaving the terminals on time and on schedule. In its biannual "Report Card" on DDOT issued on April 24, local rider advocacy group, Transportation Riders United (TRU), found that only 63 percent of buses showed up on time, based on a survey of buses on eight key routes in Detroit. "This is better than the 50 percent ... we found last November, but it's still insufficient for people who depend on transit," TRU's assistant director told the *Detroit Free Press*.

Indeed, Freeland bragged to the press that on some weekend peak hours buses were running at 100 percent of capacity. Riders whose buses never came or came late when they recently traveled on the weekend might scoff at this information.

The "DDOT Key Metrics" on DDOT's official web site tell a

story that speaks to lost jobs, long waits, and missed appointments when so many buses fail to arrive on time. On Thursday, April 12, 300 buses were scheduled for the afternoon peak service hours, but only 237 or 79 percent were running and not deficient due to “cuts or failures.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Cassandra Emerson, who had spoken out passionately at the earlier bus hearings held prior to the previous round of cuts. She related her experience with public transportation on two Sundays in April, resulting from the cuts implemented in March by the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) and last December and at the separate, suburban bus system.

“This past Sunday a trip that should have taken me one hour and 45 minutes ended up taking me four hours. I completely skipped going out that evening because I was so tired and upset after the ordeal. The Sunday before I had to go pick up medicine in Highland Park. I know that one of the buses came very late and the schedule was off so I doubt if that line was fully serviced.

“I heard there were not many people at the April meeting. They did not want a turnout like In February. I would have gone, but I did not know they were being held and they made sure no one was notified. According to the FTA [Federal Transportation Administration] rules they should notify people with a two-week to 30-day notification period. Why weren't there signs advertising the meeting on the buses or at the terminals? They just got done printing up this whole new schedule from the February cuts and now they have to do a new one. Even the March changes should not have happened because the hearings were not properly carried out.

“I usually have to leave two hours before any appointment to even get there on time. Just recently I waited for the Dexter bus for 30 minutes. One of the Dexter bus numbers are supposed to arrive every 15 minutes during that time of the day. Even before the March cuts that delay would happen. So, I do not believe it will even be better on those few busy lines they claim will have a bus every 15 minutes. How can it be better if they are taking mechanics off repairing the buses and training them to fix the garbage trucks because trash pickup is always late?”

Viveca was at the February hearings. She told the WSWs:

“I did not go to the meeting in April about the new round of cuts because I didn't know about it. I went to the one in February even though I was tired after working all night because this is so important to me. This time they did not do it the way they usually do it. Not only were there no posters in the spaces on the top of the bus where advertising goes but they did not have flyers on the buses either. The way they did it was just nasty. The only poster I ever saw was an old poster that is still up from the February meeting I attended.

“To go to work every day I have to take the Greenfield bus

all the way north to catch a bus at Northland [in a northern suburb] and get another bus to get back to my job in Detroit. I take the Dexter bus and it is so crowded all the time.

“Some of the changes that have been made relate to the SMART [suburban buses] I use a regional pass where I can ride either the Detroit buses or the suburban buses. Now with SMART it used to have just one card to be used on both buses, but now you either have to buy two cards or pay an extra fifty cents whenever you get on a SMART bus. When the SMART fare went up they started a regional plus card that costs more so you can use it on both Detroit and SMART buses.”

Allison Woodfolk has regularly opposed cuts at previous meetings as well. She told the WSWs:

“I did not know they were having that meeting. At one of the meetings I went to before, one of the DDOT managers said that 10,000 people ride the Woodward bus every day and tens of thousands use the Dexter bus. With numbers like that I know they must be making a ton of money. I knew this round of cuts was coming up at the end of April and I also know that Bing wants to privatize the whole system, which will make it even worse. They are trying to go after the drivers and cut all their benefits out.

“So many of the cuts have already been made in the last round. For example, the Puritan cuts off completely at 6:30 in the evening. Then they messed up SMART. The buses are not coming back into Detroit at the times I need them. So, you have to change from the SMART bus at the fairgrounds to a Detroit DOT bus. I have one class that I'm taking in Orchard Lake [In suburban Detroit]. I get out of my class at 8:30 p.m. or 9:00 p.m. and I did not get home until 11:00 or 11:30 p.m. because I have to change buses. They cut out all the 24-hour lines and there are chunks of time late at night the buses don't run at all.

“There is also a hardship for my family. My eight-year-old has to get up at 4:00 a.m in order to be at school by 7:50 in the morning. We have to catch the 6:19 Schoolcraft bus, but the bus has been coming too late to get to the Dexter bus on time. If they don't have another bus, if it is broken down, the waits can be long. In the morning, if that Schoolcraft bus doesn't come by 6:30 we all have to walk up to Grand River and catch that bus or we will miss our connecting bus and my children will be late for school.”



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