

# Portland, Oregon increases transit fees

Tony Colton, Hector Cordon  
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Beginning September 1, the Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District (TriMet) implemented fare increases and cuts in services in order to overcome a \$12 million budget shortfall.

TriMet is Portland, Oregon's regional public transit agency, transporting more than 350,000 riders daily—more than any other US transit system its size. Operating buses and light-rail, TriMet serves the Portland metropolitan area, with a population of more than 2.6 million people, nearly 70 percent of Oregon's total population.

The budget shortfall has several components, including \$3 million less in payroll tax revenue due to the consistently high unemployment rate in the state, which currently stands at 8.4 percent. Federal funding for TriMet has dropped by 10 percent, which accounts for a \$4 million cut.

TriMet's unionized employees' increased health care costs are expected to contribute to the budget shortfall as well, despite the recent union agreement to raise the drivers' own contribution to the costs. According to a report in May from the Health Care Cost Institute, health care costs per worker grew at a pace twice that of the general inflation rate.

This is the 11th time in the last 10 years that Portland transit riders will be faced with another fare increase. As has become usual, the increased fares are to be accompanied by reduced bus services. Disabled riders will see the specialized LIFT paratransit service restricted in their hours of operation, previously from 4:30 a.m. to 2:30 a.m., to the same schedule as that of nearby bus and MAX (light-rail) service. LIFT service boundaries will only extend three quarters of a mile from regular service. Service for some outlying areas will now end after 7:30 p.m. weeknights, and not exist at all on weekends.

Where reductions in transit services have been avoided, it is due to cuts in the workforce. TriMet has

destroyed 200 jobs and frozen non-union salaries for the fourth straight year. With reduced staffing amidst a growing population, the remaining staff will see an ongoing escalation in duties.

TriMet has ended its multizone fare system and instituted an increased general fare of \$2.50 for a two-hour pass, a 20 percent increase over the previous two-zone fare. In addition to previously eliminating free bus rides in the downtown area, then known as Fareless Square, TriMet has now ended fareless commutes on the MAX trains and done away entirely with the Free Rail Zone for the same area.

Charles, a TriMet driver, told the WSWS that a problem they've faced on the first couple of days during the fare change is being late. "They've [TriMet] been advertising the fare change to us, the drivers, more than to the passengers, at least on the buses, anyway." Passengers' scramble to make up the difference in the fares has led to delays at pick-up points.

Another driver, who asked not to be named, said, "I've left the little papers they gave us on all the seats, and at the end of the shift I picked up about 60 percent of them." He said that the slips of paper and announcements don't attract a lot of attention. He agreed with Charles that it was easier on them to collect the all-zone fare than trying to police what zones riders were going through.

Thomas, a frequent rider of TriMet, said that though he is not directly affected by the cuts in service, "The cutting of the 8 line is going to make it really difficult for the people in Sherwood [to the southwest of Portland]; it's going to be hard for anyone living away from the main areas to get anywhere, and they need to get places, too."

On the reduction in frequency of many routes, Thomas said, "You know, I've been here for a year and don't have a car right now. It was okay, because the buses came about every 15 minutes. With them coming

only every 30 minutes, that's going to make it very difficult. A lot of people say they're going to be late to work or have to spend a lot more time getting to work to be there on time."

As a disabled rider, he's glad his own rates have gone down; however, he noted, "People are struggling to pay the [old rate of] \$2.10 as it is." Asked about the cuts to LIFT, he expressed dismay: "I see people already stressing about it—people who have to walk, or can't walk!"

Another rider, John, said, "I don't like their cutting the scheduling. They say we have the greatest transit system, but not if you have to spend two hours to get anywhere. You know, they change the times from 15 minutes to 30 minutes, and that affects your commute. You've got to get to work, but now all of a sudden you're late to work!"

Funding for the YouthPass program, which serves some 13,000 Portland students, came under attack when the Democratic Party-dominated Oregon legislature eliminated its funding, thus ending the program this past June. The program provided free transportation to and from school in lieu of school-operated yellow buses. Its permanent termination was only narrowly averted when the city, Portland Public Schools and TriMet, agreed to continue funding after contentious negotiations. TriMet's contribution was to absorb losses estimated at \$1.55 million by providing service to students.

Across the United States, public transport systems are facing crisis after crisis as governments at the federal, state, and local levels disinvest in funding. According to a 2010 study, "Impacts of the Recession on Public Transportation Agencies," 84 percent nationally are raising fares, cutting service and laying off employees, or considering such actions; nearly 70 percent project budget shortfalls for the next fiscal year; and about 90 percent report flat or decreased funding at the state or local level.

These cuts and fare increases are occurring at a time when the level of ridership is "at or near modern record levels." For many, especially young people, the cost of operating a car has become prohibitive due to the proliferation of low-wage jobs and high fuel prices.

The recent contract imposed by an arbitrator on the TriMet bus drivers and train operators is in keeping with the attack on public transportation and the

working class as a whole. The contract will save the transit agency \$5 million dollars in health insurance costs that will now be placed on the rank-and-file.

Arbitrator David Gaba's statement that imposing a regressive contract that increases employees' and retirees' health care costs "best promotes the interest and welfare of the public" is an attempt to create a hostile atmosphere toward what little remains of the rights to decent benefits that workers had won in a previous period—likewise, a statement on TriMet's web site that the fare increase is due to increased benefits costs.

The previous six-year contract that had expired in November 2009 is now replaced with a three-year contract that will expire this November. The wage increase will be immediately consumed by inflation since 2009 and the out-of-pocket costs for health care. The union estimates that each worker will spend an average of \$4,000 per year for health costs. New hires will be shifted to a 401(k) defined contribution plan, rather than a defined-benefits package.

TriMet will be seeking to wrest even deeper concessions from its workers with the next contract. TriMet general manager Neil McFarlane stated, "It's a good first step, but we're in a marathon. We face many years and several contracts to truly make our benefits financially sustainable."

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