

In wake of Hurricane Sandy, New Yorkers hit with transit fare hike

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Only two months after New York City and the surrounding region were hit with the worst storm in decades—causing massive destruction of homes and workers' livelihoods and disrupting mass transit service for millions—the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) voted December 19 to increase bus and train fares, as well as tolls on the bridges and tunnels that it controls.

The fare hikes, which average out to 7.5 percent, are only the latest in a series of unending increases that have driven up the cost of a monthly pass for riding New York City's buses and subways by 32 percent since 2008. Monthly fares on the MTA's commuter rail lines have gone up by 21 percent in the same period.

In the brief discussion on the MTA board before it unanimously voted to impose the increases, one of its members, Andrew Albert, described the combination of fare and toll hikes as "the best of the worst of the lot." He warned that the relentless increases were becoming "an unfathomable proposition for many middle class families" and that "something has to happen before we price this gem of a system out of the reach of most New Yorkers."

Included in the increases passed by the MTA board are a 25 cent hike to the base subway and bus fare, which will now be \$2.50, an increase in the seven-day fare from \$29 to \$30, and a hike in the 30-day card from \$104 to \$112. The MTA will also charge another dollar if a customer fails to refill an old card and must purchase a new one.

The fares will also go up on the authority's two commuter lines, the Long Island Railroad and Metro-North, by an average of 9 percent. Each individual railroad carries about 300,000 weekday passengers. The base tolls on MTA bridges and tunnels will also go up from \$6.50 to \$7.50, with discounts for users of E-

ZPass. For the Verrazano Bridge, which links Staten Island to Brooklyn, the basic cash toll increases to a whopping \$15.

This is the seventh fare hike since 2003, and will go into effect March 1 of next year. The agency hopes it will raise \$450 million. Additional increases averaging out to 7.5 percent have been projected for 2015 and 2017.

As soon as the vote was over, MTA chief Joe Lhota announced that he would resign his position effective December 31 so that he can run for mayor in 2013 as a Republican candidate. Lhota, who served as deputy mayor and political enforcer under Rudolph Giuliani, the former mayor, was described in a book by Giuliani as "a rarity in New York City—an ideological Republican."

Having been chairman for less than a year, Lhota has been built up by the media as the man responsible for getting the trains and buses running after Hurricane Sandy, a claim that ignored both the round-the-clock efforts of transit workers and the fact that the transit system was still not functioning in a significant number of areas.

The reality is that the MTA was ill prepared for the hurricane, even though its own panel of experts warned of the likelihood of such an event and made detailed proposals to protect the system. Because of their cost, these measures were not implemented.

The MTA is strapped for resources because of its ballooning debt and inadequate federal and state funding. The agency's resources are dedicated increasingly to meeting payments on its \$32 billion in long-term debt, which is expected to rise to \$39 billion by 2015. Out of its current \$13.1 billion annual budget, the agency uses \$2.3 billion to service the debt, which by 2015 is expected to rise to \$2.6 billion, and possibly

to more than \$3 billion by 2016.

The bond debt has been accumulated as a result of capital improvement programs designed to save the transit system from complete collapse after years of underfunding and serious neglect of infrastructure in the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, due to a lack of federal and state support, the agency has been selling bonds and paying out interest on them.

Almost a third of all fare and toll increases go to paying off this debt. The cost of the hurricane's damage to transit infrastructure will compel the authority to increase this debt, borrowing almost \$5 billion in short-term recovery notes over the next two years.

The MTA is determined to make transit workers as well as passengers pay for this ever-growing red ink. The authority had already cut back train and bus service and eliminated some 3,500 jobs throughout the system.

For transit workers, it is more than 11 months since the last arbitrators' award expired on January 15 of this year, and the agency continues to demand a wage freeze, the introduction of part-time bus operators, the expansion of one-person train operation, (i.e., an increase in the number of lines that do not have a conductor), a doubling of workers' contributions to health plans, as well as other takeaways.

Workers' growing dissatisfaction with the role of the union, Transport Workers Union Local 100, found clear expression on December 15, when a mass membership meeting called by the leadership attracted barely 700 of the local's 38,000 members. The president of the union, John Samuelson, recently won reelection with a little more than 7,000 votes, less than one fifth of the membership. More than one third (13,000) of New York City's transit workers are ineligible to vote or attend meetings because of their refusal to pay back dues stemming from the union's loss of the dues check-off system for 17 months as punishment for calling a three-day strike in December 2005.

At the meeting, Samuelson provided no perspective for a fight against the MTA. Ruling out a strike, he proposed to continue stalled negotiations with the transit agency. He defended his support for Barack Obama under conditions in which the Democratic president is negotiating with the Republicans to cut trillions of dollars from social services such as Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, as well as

discretionary funding that includes money for mass transit.

The MTA is a public agency composed of board members selected by both the Democratic and Republican parties. Its determination to freeze transit workers' wages and continuously raise fares is part of the bipartisan agreement by both major parties, locally and nationally, to make the working population pay for the deepening economic crisis.

In New York City, the fare hikes and the wage freeze are being imposed to secure the profits of the same Wall Street banks and wealthy bondholders who were bailed out with trillions in public funds following the 2008 financial meltdown and to ensure that the city's 59 billionaires and thousands of multi-millionaires are not compelled to pay any new taxes.



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