

Detroit residents forced to wait hours for buses

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A year and a half after Detroit Mayor David Bing privatized the management of the Detroit bus system, service has worsened dramatically, riders say, with buses sometimes arriving up to four hours late.

In April 2012, Bing slashed the budget of the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) by \$12.6 million and transferred management over to a private company. This led to the shutting down of numerous routes. Much weekend and all overnight service was ended.

The city is currently under the control of Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, who has been appointed and given full governing powers in order to slash jobs and rip up services to pay off bondholders. Orr is planning a new round of privatizations.

Since Detroit has no other forms of public transportation, the one third of Detroit residents who do not have cars must rely on buses to go to work or school, shop for groceries and get to medical appointments. Riders say the problems are getting worse, with buses at major routes chronically late or often so full they cannot pick up passengers.

The WSWs spoke to bus riders on Seven Mile Road and on Woodward Avenue, two major thoroughfares in the city. The Woodward Avenue route was one of four singled out for special consideration in the “415 Plan” unveiled last year by Don Freeland, CEO of Envisurage, the company that took over management of city buses.

Envisurage’s plan was sold as a way to redirect resources, sacrificing other bus runs to provide a bus every 15 minutes on weekdays from 6 am to 6 pm on the four main bus routes. These routes, including the Woodward avenue route, carry the majority of Detroit bus riders.

During non-peak hours, buses from metro Detroit

have stopped going into the city, discharging their passengers onto the DDOT coaches on Woodward Avenue.

There is growing anger among both Detroit residents and bus workers over the deteriorating bus service. Bus workers are reportedly planning a sick-out today to protest deteriorating conditions. The workers are struggling to maintain service under impossible circumstances.

Instead of working to unite Detroit residents and workers against bus cuts, the Amalgamated Transit Union leadership is seeking to pit bus drivers against riders, suggesting that putting police on the buses would solve the problems created by the systematic de-funding of the bus system.

The WSWs spoke to Detroit resident Sharon Beasley about the lack of decent public transportation in the city. After being unemployed for almost two years, Ms. Beasley recently started working again in a group home, caring for mental health patients at minimum wage. She is looking for a better job and has credentials as a Certified Nursing Assistant and as a chef, and has a college degree in psychology.

Sharon explained that she was recently waiting for a bus to take her from the New Center north along Woodward Avenue. She was trying to get to Seven Mile Road, a direct route on a single bus with a distance of about five miles and a travel time of no more than ten minutes in a car. She said that as she was waiting during the lunch hour with a large group of passengers several buses filled to capacity had passed.

“I waited forty minutes after leaving the job center. There were about ten people at the stop who got off other buses. After awhile people started to walk away. There was a 70-year old lady who started walking because she said if you stand at a spot with too many

people they won't stop because the driver knows he cannot fit everyone on the bus."

The WSWs also spoke with several riders who were waiting on Seven Mile Road at the intersection of Woodward for a bus. Don Hutch is a disabled veteran who regularly takes the Woodward bus to and from Midtown in Detroit, where he lives in veteran's housing near the VA hospital.

"Did you see that bus go by?" Hutch asked. "That is the second one that has passed us because they are so crowded. Sometimes it is even worse when they do not stop at all because they see me in my wheelchair. In the summer it's not so bad, but when it gets cold outside I can be freezing to death."

Frostie, a cosmetologist, said, "I ride the bus because I do not have a car. I can tell you it is horrible, just horrible. I have been standing here for an hour and a half and that is a regular thing. Sometimes the buses are full, and they just pass you by. I once waited four hours for a bus on this route. Woodward used to be every fifteen minutes.

"You have to work around buses all the time. I go to church at ten o'clock and have to leave my house at 7:00 am. My doctor's appointment is at nine, and I have to leave the house at 6:00 am."

Tania Lee and her son were waiting at the same stop. "I have a car, but my daughter uses it too," she said. "She needed it now and that is why I am taking the bus today.

"The buses are very slow. The Seven Mile bus takes two to three hours to show up. We have been waiting here for an hour and a half already. When my daughter takes the bus to school she has to get up every day at 6:30 to be at school by 8:30."

Sharon also threw light on how the breakdown in bus service is affecting people's ability to get to work. "It seems that all I do is go to work and come home and sleep," she said. "I am spending so much time on the buses getting back and forth. On a typical day I wait for the Seven Mile bus, and if it comes I then have to transfer and wait for a Van Dyke. If the Seven Mile does not show up, I walk down to the Six Mile and take that, but then I still have to walk the last mile to work."

"Though my work schedule is set for the month, every day is not the same. Today I do not have to be there until 2:00 pm. I know the buses don't run right between 10:00 am and when the kids get off of school

even though they are scheduled. That means that if I leave even at noon to get to work by two, I take the chance of being late.

"One woman at work quit because her car broke down. She had to find another job. She lived on the west side, but with the buses the way they are by the time she got home, fed her kids, made sure they got up again for school and dealt with the buses she had no time to sleep. She was in her 30s and looked like she was 50."

"The emergency manager is not making the buses run better, he is only concerned with cutting services and paying people off," Sharon added, referring to Kevyn Orr, the emergency manager. "We are not numbers on a paper, we are people."



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