

“What you have now is not a true government, it is a dictatorship”

Detroit bus drivers speak out on bankruptcy, crisis in city bus system

Our reporters

21 December 2013

For four years, Detroit residents have seen the already grossly inadequate public bus system gutted by cuts in public funding. Bus service in the city is now in daily acute crisis. Many workers have lost their jobs or faced disciplinary measures because buses on major routes are chronically late or so full they cannot pick up passengers. At least one third of Detroit residents do not have cars and must rely on buses to go to work or school, shop for groceries and get to medical appointments.

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. He recently appointed a new management company to take over the bus system. The aim is to privatize part or all of the two systems in the Detroit area, the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT), which operates in the city, and the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART), which runs a limited service from Detroit's suburbs.

Detroit Mayor Dave Bing slashed the budget of the DDOT by \$12.6 million and shut down numerous routes last year. Much weekend and all overnight service was officially ended. Even where routes are still scheduled, riders have had to wait in some cases four hours for a bus because the fleet is in such a state of disrepair that there are no coaches to make the runs.

On the main routes that still are operating, drivers are forced to pass up passengers waiting at stops because the coaches are full. There are estimates that since the cuts began in 2009, the daily ridership has declined about 13 percent while the number of drivers has been reduced by half in the last ten years. DDOT daily ridership is estimated at 100,000 passengers a day.

In late October drivers called in sick or took vacation days, closing the bus system for a day. More than 200 drivers and their supporters attended a rally outside of the City-County

building in downtown Detroit that day. They were protesting intolerable conditions, including assaults on drivers, deteriorating service, overwork as well as cuts to wages, pensions and healthcare. The majority of transit workers saw the need to link their struggle to the broader issues facing the working class in Detroit, and many carried hand-held signs appealing to passengers and calling for expanded service.

While the struggle by transit workers has the potential to win broad sympathy, the Amalgamated Transit Union is advancing as its central demand the call for police on buses, in effect pitting drivers against passengers. The ATU has disavowed responsibility for the sickout, setting drivers up for victimization, and has rejected any attempt to mobilize transit riders behind the drivers or link the protest to broader issues facing the working class.

The WSWs spoke to a number of bus drivers about the conditions they face.

Alvin, 58, has been a driver for 8 years. He said: “I’ve never seen anything like this in my whole life. It’s just unbelievable. I think the bankruptcy is a big hoax. I think it’s just another takeover of the city by a hierarchy, and it might turn around and backfire in their face. Where did this guy Buckfire come from? I never heard of him in my life. Now he’s subject to collect \$8 million, and for what?” Kenneth Buckfire is an investment banker hired as a consultant by the state to review Detroit’s finances.

“This Emergency Manager coming in here and hiring all these people when you say there is no money. Where did all these people come from? ‘We hired this lady for \$175,000 a year, but we want to underline that we’re not paying her benefits.’ Well pay me \$175,000 too, and you won’t have to pay me benefits either! I don’t know if it’s designed to fail or something like that because I’ve never seen anything like this in my life.

“People are upset at overcrowded buses. No one likes to be crowded. A couple years ago a guy got shot and killed on the bus just for the simple fact that he bumped up against

somebody. He apologized and did everything in the book, but it wasn't good enough.

"You can't even get a headlight replaced. Just routine maintenance, and it's not being done. I called in about an engine light on. I was told to keep driving. Now the Hot Trans light is on, so now that has to be done. It needs to be funded more, with the right kind of people in place.

"I've been here going on eight years. I'm already retired, working on my second retirement. You have to have ten years invested for the pension so that kind of blew me out the water. So now I'm just basically working for a paycheck. The retirement check I get every month is not that outstanding. That's why I'm still working. Now the only way I can receive a monthly income is Social Security when I reach the age at 62."

H. Williams has been driving a bus in Detroit for 17 years.

"We don't have buses. We need equipment. They say come January or February a few routes will go back to 24-hour service. I know it can't happen overnight. But to fix it we need it now.

"Sometimes people do have to wait an hour for a bus, and we have to pass them up because we're only supposed to pick up so many. We feel bad for them, but there's nothing we can do because the service is not out there. We want to do our job, and passengers need to get to their job or whatever they're trying to do like doctors appointments, but if the service is not out there they can't get there, but then they take action on the first people they see, which is us.

"I've been on some buses that break down from not having enough coolant or oil because they're short on it.

"They claim that they're bankrupt and have to cut. A lot of people moved out of the city. They're hitting the people with the pensions. I don't think that's fair. You worked all your life for a pension, and you're settled and you get your little monthly income. Now they're talking about cutting that. That's horrible! If you've been out of work, retired, and collecting your pension for 10 years, where are you gonna go now? Your body's broke down and you've been out of the work life for ten years."

Tarron Warren has been working for DDOT for twelve years. He told the *World Socialist Web Site* that transit workers already accepted pay cuts three years ago based on promises from the union and management that the money would be returned. Now management wants more cuts, and Emergency Manager Kevin Orr is demanding that the pensions of city workers, including bus drivers, be reduced to pennies on the dollar.

Warren said: "When I found out about the bankruptcy ruling I was hurt. I felt like we were abandoned. They did not really take their time to look into this. I feel something criminal is going on. But those big wigs are in bed with each

other, and us small fish are in bed with the sharks. These are hardworking people that are losing. When they first approached us with the pay cut three years ago we gave the percentage they asked. Our pay dropped from \$17.89 down to \$15.31 an hour. At the time, they told us they would give it back. They never did that. When the city first started crying broke they were threatening us about something even worse.

"But the bus system has to be there. The bus system is for the people. We have to have it. Federal law has something to do with this. People have to get back and forth to work and for personal trips, and church and things like that.

"The City took the money from the feds for buses, put it in the general fund and then were dipping in there for other stuff, dipping in for their personal agendas. The people sitting at the round table, they are the ones that are eating. But the people are not. I am not an expert about these things but the union is sitting at the round table too. If the union was to go along with their members they will lose incentives, they might have to go back to driving a bus.

"They called it being nice by offering to extend our current contract until July 1. Then we go back to the table for a new contract. The city really does not want a bus system at all. They want it all under the umbrella of SMART or the RTA [the new Regional Transit Authority].

"The ones that do this work—police, fire, ambulance, and us, too—are bearing the burden of the cuts. I am just as fed up as everyone else. People have been very patient. No one is going down there causing trouble yet, because we had faith in our elected officials. But what you have now is not a true government; it is a dictatorship.

"Anything they can do to cover up, to hide wrongdoing, they will do. What better way than to wipe the books clean than with a bankruptcy. They say, 'Let's get rid of the problem.'"



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact