

Detroit emergency manager targets bus riders, transit workers

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Both bus riders and bus drivers in Detroit are being singled out for further pain under Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr's Plan of Adjustment. High-paid consultants brought in to write the "Disclosure Document" Orr submitted with his filing on February 21 have called for a fare increase.

Reports indicate passengers will pay a dollar more, a 67 percent increase in the current \$1.50 fare, over the next few years. The document also cites the need to raise the cost for transfers.

Bus drivers, who have already been hit with pay cuts and layoffs, are to be swept up in the concessions imposed on all city workers. All city contracts are currently under extension provisions with the de facto suspension of collective bargaining under the emergency manager.

The Disclosure Document makes it clear Orr plans to turn to union leaders to push through further reductions in wages, benefits and working conditions demanded by bankers and bondholders. Furthermore, the document makes clear that he can simply impose whatever wages and conditions he wants using the power of the emergency manager law and the federal bankruptcy court.

Federal Transit law ostensibly exempts workers in the public transit system from a contract unilaterally imposed by the emergency manager. But transit workers should not place any confidence in any such assurances. As the bankruptcy proceeding had demonstrated all sorts of laws and protections, including the state constitution's prohibition against public employee pension cuts, can be overturned virtually overnight.

Several years ago the leaders of American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and the Amalgamated Transit Union went along with similar pay cuts that the city imposed on other public workers.

The document lists a number of concessions recommended to attack wage levels, benefits and working conditions built up by generations of workers. There is no plan to restore the huge pay cuts already imposed, and there are likely to be further ones. Like employers across the country, Orr and his lieutenants in the Mayor's office hope continuing high unemployment in the city can be relied on to enable them to hire at the lowest wage rates possible.

A laundry list of long-demanded reductions in nonwage

compensation is included. The document takes aim at "overly generous" attendance policies, leaves of absence, vacation days, holidays, tuition reimbursement, and overtime. The plan is to adjust shift scheduling, cut shift premiums, and create temporary assignments. Streamlining work rules is also demanded.

In a crude attempt to pit bus riders against the workers who drive and repair the buses, Orr's Disclosure Document specifically attacks bus drivers for what management deems excessive absenteeism. Bus mechanics come under attack for "inflexibility" with regard to adherence to work rules.

The plan also calls for privatization of city services including possible privatization in the transportation department, which is already managed by a private company. The new city administration has also turned over fare collection operations to a private company.

Unable to deny the utterly dysfunctional state of affairs, the city's transit system was the first thing that Detroit's new mayor Mike Duggan addressed in his State of the City speech last week. The Democrat revealed devastating metrics on the actual state of the system while relating "feel your pain" anecdotes about stranded bus riders.

He said 61 percent of city residents do not have direct access to a car. The Motor City is now the poorest major city in the US with over 42 percent of households living on incomes below the poverty level.

Duggan referred to the fact that Detroit had the oldest fleet of buses of any major city in the country, and cited plans to hire 40 mechanics and 40 new drivers. Several hundred jobs in transit were cut over the past few years.

Reductions in force have been caused by cuts in the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) budget of tens of millions of dollars annually over the past several years. Previous cuts in service brought the number of buses on the official schedule from 400 during peak hours ten years ago to just 220 now.

In 2009 and 2012 whole runs were eliminated as well as overnight service. If and when fifty new buses arrive in September, as promised by Duggan in his speech, they likely will have to be dedicated to filling huge gaps on any given day as dozens of buses are off the road for repairs.

The coldest winter in decades has been a freezing nightmare for Detroit residents who often must wait hours for a bus, with buses crowded to capacity, even on the main routes. It has also been a trial for bus drivers who have braved record snowfall, burgeoning potholes in the streets, and continuing equipment problems exacerbated by the bitter cold.

The lack of service has led to series of attacks on bus drivers. Rather than conducting a struggle to demand an improvement in services, the Amalgamated Transit Union demanded police escorts on the buses. Mayor Duggan has announced that buses will now be outfitted with security cameras.

This transportation crisis exists alongside the continuing jobs crisis in which, according to Bloomberg, only 49.4 percent of Detroit's 16 and older population were employed or job-hunting in 2012. The national average was 63.7 percent. What jobs there are require transportation. In 2011, 62 percent of Detroit residents who did work did so outside of the city, according to the US Census Bureau.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to riders at the Rosa Parks Transit Center in Downtown Detroit.

Aniya, 19-year-old community college student who works two jobs at fast-food restaurants, described the degrading conditions she faces. "I hate waiting for these buses with a passion. I have to leave two and a half hours ahead of time for both my jobs because either the bus won't come or the bus I was waiting on was too crowded to pick me up.

"I'm always late to work and they tried to fire me but I'm a good worker so they haven't yet. I get home from work at two in the morning on a regular basis. When I get off work at ten or eleven, I get on the last bus of the city, and I have to walk the rest of the way home because there are no more buses around. But you have to make a living. It has to be done but it's hard."

Retiree Charlotte Longmire was waiting outside in near-zero temperatures with a large crowd of commuters during rush hour for the Woodward bus, which runs on one of the main thoroughfares in the city. The senior citizen told WSWs reporters she had never seen the buses so crowded, with wall-to-wall people.

Valencia Hill was waiting for a bus with her two young children. She is a school custodian and bus attendant where her kids go to school. The three of them arrive home from their evening commute oftentimes as late as 9 pm, she said, adding, "It makes me feel really bad, having them out that late. They should be home, eating dinner and doing their homework.

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"And we're not supposed to get out of the cold and wait for a bus inside a store. Oh yeah, I know what it's like to try to make it."

Referring to the emergency manager's plan to pay city pensioners only a fraction of what they're owed, she said, "That's ridiculous after they invested their life! Through no

fault of their own, they have to lose their pensions. The money is there! The question is, 'Who has it?'"

Gerard is 23 years old and is an "inspirational rapper." He said, "My high school was shut down. It's like an abandoned house. All these prisons are being built, and high schools are being shut down. You don't see restaurants here. You see gas stations and liquor stores. My son is saying, 'Why don't we get to have things? Why did this house get burnt down?' Our kids are looking at our city too.

"There's a lot of work that can be done. If you fund it, they will come; if you don't, they won't. We've got a situation where it's casinos versus high schools."

Referring to the fact that overnight service has been eliminated since 2012, he said, "I sat out there all night once waiting for the bus. I promised myself I would never get stranded at the job again. I don't care if I have to leave early to do it. The anger kept me on fire that night. I had to wait until six o'clock in the morning. And when the bus finally came, I could barely move my legs to get on. This is a service that people need. That could have been anyone."

Charles, a 52-year-old crossing guard, spoke to the WSWs after attending a Department of Transportation meeting in January. "Kevyn Orr, we didn't need him. The way I see it, he's messing up more than it was before. How is he getting paid \$250,000 while we're bankrupt! We can't be bankrupt if he's still getting paid! The way they're talking, the Mayor has to go to him. I thought the Mayor was here to take care of things, to make things better than they are."

Referring to DDOT head Dan Dirks's statement that bankers are indicating that bus service should be cut down to Monday through Friday during daytime hours only, Charles said, "I'm worried they might try to cut all of it. People have to work Saturday and Sunday too! So what they're saying is we stay in the house on the weekend? People catch the bus to go to church, to go to work.

"People have been laid off their jobs like the bus mechanics. There's a whole lot of things that are wrong. Privatize everything so the rich can get richer and the poor can get poorer. If they privatize everything we're going to get charged up the kazoo. Water is already high. They're going to want you to pay for the lighting, just like raising the bus fare. For what?"



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