Seattle workers to be hit by transit fare increases, cuts to service

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On September 27, the first round of proposed service cuts hit King County Metro Transit, which serves the Seattle, Washington, area. Twenty-eight lines will ultimately be eliminated—including the number 47 line, which connects one of the most densely populated census tracts on the West Coast to downtown Seattle. Eighteen others will be revised or eliminated. As planned, dozens of routes will by scaled back, and in excess of 40 lines will be eliminated in a multiphase plan over the next two years.

With approximately 40 percent of workers in downtown Seattle using the already overburdened public transportation system, the cuts to service will result in worsening conditions. As it stands, overstuffed buses frequently pass up passengers, leading to missed appointments and lost hours of work. The further elimination of lines will throw more riders onto other routes, many of which are also facing service reductions. For those with mobility issues, accessing alternate stops that are often blocks away will pose additional hardship.

In the week before the first round of cuts, King County Transit officials announced that some of the cutbacks might not be as deep as expected due to higher than anticipated tax revenues, and could be delayed into 2016. Many of the cuts, however, will still go into effect. The elimination of more than 300 transit jobs was touted as a “savings,” contributing to a slight lessening in the originally planned cuts.

In the November elections, voters in Seattle are being asked to approve Transit Proposition 1, a 0.1 percent tax hike and an additional $60 car tag fee to pay for the public transit system. The passage of Transit Proposal 1 would not affect the cuts already in place, but is being promoted as a means to stay a second and third round of cuts originally planned for 2015.

Fares will go up by 25 cents on March 1, 2015, regardless of whether the measure passes—the fifth fare increase since 2008, with some fares reaching $3.25 per ride. Also on March 1, King County will introduce a reduced-fare scheme for low-income residents. The $1.50 fare will be available to those whose income is 200 percent of the federal poverty level—$23,240 for an individual, or $47,700 for a family of four. The transit board is presenting this as a progressive step.

The reduced-fare scheme is meant as a distraction from the wholly reactionary proposition to disproportionately tax poor and working class people through the imposition of the sales tax and licensing fee. Given the cost of living in Seattle, where the average monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment for the city and a 10-mile radius is $1,500, the base income requirement to qualify for the reduced rate leaves many struggling individuals and families subject to the increased fares.

The expected loss of revenue from the reduced rates is undetermined, as the number of people who will qualify and participate is unknown. While it is estimated that between 45,000 and 100,000 people will be eligible, with such a broad range any accurate estimation of the costs is impossible. Any shortfall will serve as a pretext for future cuts.

The Seattle area plays host to such companies as Boeing, which was granted the largest tax rebate on record in US history last November when the Washington state legislature voted to give it an $8.7 billion break through 2040. Microsoft, Amazon, and Starbucks Coffee Company have also been the beneficiaries of enormous tax breaks. Many of the leaders and former heads of these same companies live in or near the Seattle Metro area. Bill Gates, the Microsoft co-founder who sits at the top of the Forbes

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rich list, is among them.

Jeff Bezos of Amazon along with Howard Schultz of Starbucks, who landed a comfy spot on this year's list of highest paid CEOs, also live in the area. Employees of their companies, many of whom make barely poverty-level wages and rely on public transportation to get to work, are in line to be hard hit by the fare increases and service reductions.

Even a fraction of the personal fortunes of such individuals would be enough not only to cover the supposed "shortfall" facing transit, among so many other sections of public infrastructure that are wanting, but to expand and enhance services.

As with many states, the constant largess of Washington's lawmakers toward Boeing, Amazon, Microsoft, et al, leaves the infrastructure crumbling. Any proposition of shoring up the landslide is foisted onto the backs of the working class and poor in the form of such tactics as Transit Proposition 1 and higher fares.

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