

Massachusetts public transit crisis drags into fourth week

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As another storm added snow and ice this weekend to the record amounts in the Boston area, the crisis of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) continued to deepen.

As of February 17—nearly three weeks after a Red Line subway fire that presaged the system's breakdown—more than 100 of the 218 Red Line cars were still out of service. Only 48 of 120 Orange Line cars and 102 of 219 Green Line cars were in service. Red Line service beyond North Quincy and Green Line B service beyond Kenmore Square are not expected to resume until Monday.

During the first two weeks of February, only 8 percent of trains on the Fitchburg commuter rail line were on time. On the Newburyport/Rockport line, 14 percent of trains were on time; on the Stoughton line on-time performance was less than 20 percent. Of the four morning trains that usually run into Boston from Stoughton, the only one that wasn't cancelled last week arrives at South Station after 9 a.m., making it impossible for workers to be on time.

Most station platforms along the MBTA's commuter rail are not protected from the weather. The local media have not reported any cases of frostbite, but a serious risk exists as wind chill factors drop below zero degrees Fahrenheit (-18 Celsius) and trains are cancelled without warning.

While salaried professionals who are able to work from home have been using that method as a backstop, hundreds of thousands of retail, restaurant, custodial and other hourly workers are losing wages because of the breakdown of public transportation. State law requires that businesses pay at least three hours of wages to workers who report for work when the employer is closed, but travel time to and from work is not paid. Many commutes that are normally less than

an hour have been stretched out to several hours since the first blizzard hit at the end of January.

The *Boston Globe*, citing US Census figures, reported that more than 40 percent of low-wage workers in Massachusetts use public transportation. The *Globe* interviewed a Dunkin' Donuts worker who lost \$148 of gross pay after being forced to miss two shifts. The woman, who has a 6-year-old son and 7-month-old daughter, might not be able to make rent this month.

Those who are able to drive have also faced extraordinarily long commutes because of streets narrowed by snow banks and clogged with traffic. Exorbitant prices for parking have accompanied competition for spaces. *Masslive.com* interviewed a barber who works on commission and lost five days of work to the storms. His subway commute is normally 25 minutes, but on a day when the barbershop was open he drove into work—a two-hour drive because of traffic—and had to pay \$38 at a parking garage.

IHS Global Insight estimates that a one-day shutdown of business in the state would result in \$194.11 million in lost wages, \$40.45 million in lost retail sales and total economic losses of \$265 million.

Last week it was revealed that the state has used prison labor to shovel outdoor subway tracks and maintenance yards. While the state also put out a call through the Boston Building Trades union for volunteers to shovel at \$30 per hour, about 50 inmates from the state Department of Correction were added to the crew. According to a report by *American Prospect*, the median wage for state prisoners in the US is 20 cents per hour. Prison laborers are not eligible for workers' compensation if hurt in the hazardous job of shoveling snow from subway tracks.

The crisis is affecting school children as young as 6th grade, who were on vacation last week but return to

school on Monday, February 23. Following a wildcat strike by school bus drivers in October 2013, the Boston School Committee forced through an austerity measure in March 2014 that replaced dedicated school buses with MBTA passes for some students. While 6th and 7th graders are given the “option” of using school buses, students in 8th grade and above have to take public transportation. More than 15,000 students have been affected by the MBTA’s crisis.

Governor Charlie Baker, who as secretary of administration and finance in the late 1990s was instrumental in saddling the state’s transportation system with debt, made the strange declaration last week that shoppers should turn Valentine’s Day into “Valentine’s Week” in order to increase the revenues of retailers.

On Friday, Baker named a seven-member commission of experts to study the causes of the MBTA’s collapse. While claiming that this body will diagnose the system’s problems and offer practical recommendations, Baker—who recently cut the MBTA’s fiscal year 2015 operating budget by \$14 million due to a state deficit—is incapable of addressing the billions of dollars of deferred maintenance that have caused the crisis.

Even if he offers proposals of additional capital bond issuances, these will come with a heavy price. According to the MBTA’s fiscal year 2014 financial statements, it pays about \$270 million per year in interest on capital debt. On the operating side of its budget, it receives state revenues from the regressive sales tax, but also issues bonds with future sales tax revenues as collateral. In other words, it borrows against future state revenues that will be paid disproportionately by the working class.

Baker gave his new commission until the end of March to issue a report. In all likelihood, he is hoping that the crisis will have passed by then so that he can bury the issue.

Baker, along with the Democrats who control both houses of the state legislature, will continue the pretense that society does not have enough wealth to fix the MBTA’s infrastructure. In reality, simply expropriating the assets of the state’s billionaires would provide more than enough money.

The 2014 *Forbes* list of the world’s 400 wealthiest people included six Massachusetts residents, among

them Fidelity Investments President Abigail Johnson; her father, Edward C. Johnson III (who has his own fortune) and New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft.

The latter has made his billions through the paper/packaging industry, real estate, and owning a professional football franchise. Like many in his class, he demands public funds be spent to increase the wealth of his empire. Last week, at the height of the MBTA’s crisis, the *Foxboro Reporter* revealed that MassDOT (the Department of Public Transportation) had signed a secret deal with the Kraft Group in which the state promised to spend at least \$23 million on a rail bed that would provide weekday commuter rail trains to the businesses around the Patriots’ stadium.



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