

New subway station in New York cannot hide the growing crisis of public transit and housing

Mark Witkowski and Sandy English
22 September 2015

With fanfare and self-congratulation from the political establishment, New York City opened its first new subway station in 26 years last week, a terminus for the 7 line on the far West Side of Manhattan.

The station is little more than a gift for big real estate, providing easier access to luxury housing and retail development in that area of the city. As Daniel Doctoroff, the former Deputy Mayor for Economic Development in the Bloomberg administration, noted in an op-ed in the *Daily News*, “The extension of the 7 Line was the critical element in the Bloomberg Administration’s comprehensive plan to turn the Hudson Yards District...into a vibrant extension of Midtown.”

The Hudson Yards development, a commercial, retail and high-end residential complex being developed by the Related Company and Oxford Properties, will have a hotel, five skyscrapers—two of which will be super-tall buildings, among the ten highest in the city—and over 20,000 units of luxury apartments. When completed, the project will be the largest private real estate development in American history.

The first phases of the construction will cost over \$20 billion and the subway station and the 1.5-mile extension from Times Square cost an additional \$2 billion. Commercial tenants in the development’s almost 10 million square feet of office space will include Coach, L’Oreal and the SAP software corporation.

While the new station will bring office and retail workers to the development, the expansion of the subway was not made for the benefit of the vast majority of subway riders. Instead, it was built to line the pockets of developers and to make the west side of Midtown, which has historically been underserved by mass transit, more accessible for the wealthiest layers of the upper middle class.

The 7 Line, which first began operating in 1915, is typical of the MTA’s aging subway system. The line is one of several that service the working-class neighborhoods of Queens, home to hundreds of thousands of immigrants from all over the world.

Many mornings the entire line, which is used by 500,000 riders a day, is temporarily shut down due to a stalled train or malfunctioning signal system, leaving riders stranded with no way to get to work. When the overcrowded line is functioning, riders often have to wait for several trains to pass before they are able to find one with room to board.

The entire subway system is in poor repair after decades of neglect and lack of funding for maintenance. The new trains introduced several decades ago do not alter the problems associated with aging rail and signals. Delays are common and extensive.

For many riders there are simply no other options. Nearly 60 percent of households in New York City do not own an automobile, and driving can be prohibitively expensive, with tolls on many of the bridges costing \$14 round trip. Parking in a garage or lot in Manhattan can cost \$300-400 a month, and private parking spots in luxury buildings are being sold for \$1 million.

Workers living in the outer boroughs of New York City who must travel to a borough other than Manhattan have a particularly long ride. There is only a single subway line connecting Queens and Brooklyn directly. Only last Tuesday a train on this line, the G, suffered a derailment, holding up commutes on the line itself and causing substantial delays on other lines.

There are no subway lines connecting the Bronx to Queens or Brooklyn without having to travel the length of Manhattan. Bus service between the outer boroughs is sporadic and irregular.

Workers in New York are burdened with the longest daily commutes in the nation. Some of the details of the public transportation crisis are laid out in a report issued by City Comptroller Scott Stringer's office.

A total 3,181,200 city residents commute to jobs within the city. The largest group by mode of transportation is subway riders, at 1,459,000. They spend an average of 7 hours, 51 minutes a week getting to and from work. This adds up nearly to the equivalent of a sixth day of work. The city's 355,600 daily bus commuters averaged an even longer trip, at just over eight hours a week getting to and from work.

The report also indicates that overcrowding is a serious problem on the New York City subway system. By the end of 2013, total ridership had risen to 5.5 million daily riders, the highest number in decades. In addition to workers commuting to jobs, this total includes students, those looking for work, retirees and visitors.

Increased use of public transit has been accompanied by increased delays in service, which are up by nearly 45 percent over the preceding year. This reflects poor maintenance of the system, in turn the product of cuts in state spending and the demand by bondholders to be paid before maintenance work is performed.

At the heart of New York City is the core borough of Manhattan, a major center of global finance, corporate governance and tourism. It also ranks high as a center of publishing, retail, food services, health care and professional services. On any given day Manhattan sees its population nearly double from 1.6 million to over 3.1 million as workers commute to jobs from across the region.

Very few workers can afford to live close to their jobs in Manhattan. According to a recent Bloomberg news report, the average rent for a typically small one-bedroom apartment is \$3,400 a month in that borough.

Areas close to the Manhattan core such as Long Island City in Queens and Williamsburg in Brooklyn have also seen similar dramatic increases in rents and home prices. Upper-middle-class professionals moving to those areas are increasingly displacing working-class residents.

Workers traveling from more remote areas of the city, such as College Point in Queens, the Flatlands section of Brooklyn or Co-op City in the Bronx, face lengthy commutes that involve taking a bus to a subway line—a process that can sometimes take up to two hours door-to-door.

There are now no plans to expand the system in any significant manner, save for the 2nd Avenue subway line,

which has been in the works for a quarter of a century.

In an effort to find adequate affordable housing, many workers have been forced to move to areas far outside the city. A growing number of workers commute from the Poconos in Pennsylvania. Their commute by bus is typically three hours each way. For many years, developers in the area propagated the myth that a high-speed rail line would be constructed to New York City to make the commute a civilized one. To date, however, there have been no concrete proposals to build it.

In the areas north of the city, the Metro North railroad has seen a steady increase in ridership, as workers move to the Hudson Valley to find affordable housing.

The railroad relies on technology that is more than a half-century old. The trains move slowly, resulting in a longer commute than would be necessary had the system been modernized to operate at higher speeds.

Metro North is not only the source of constant delays but is also plagued by serious accidents, including the deaths of five passengers and a driver whose car was stalled on the tracks in February, and a derailment in December 2013 that killed four commuters.

Housing cost savings in the areas outside of New York City are often negated by higher property taxes and the expense of the commute itself. A monthly ticket from Beacon to New York City, for example, cost \$460.

The political and business establishment is concerned about the housing shortage in New York City because of the lure of megaprofits from real estate, but they are also aware of the potential it has to lead to a social eruption from the millions of workers and middle-class people who either cannot find a place to live or are a paycheck away from disaster. Protests in front of the governor's Manhattan office organized by various housing advocacy groups take place on a regular basis.

New York City Mayor De Blasio, still dealing with record homelessness two years after his campaign promising change, has announced initiatives to expand affordable housing. Even his supporters admit that the aim of 200,000 "affordable" units over the next ten years falls far short of the bare minimum needed.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact