

Massachusetts: MBTA janitors to be laid off as cuts continue

John Marion
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The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), which contracts with two private janitorial services for the cleaning of buses, subways, and subway stations, is triggering the layoff of 76 full-time janitors by cutting the amounts it pays S.J. Services and ABM Industries.

In addition to the layoffs, workers are being forced to decide within 48 hours about moving from day to night shifts, which start at 11 p.m. Those with school-age children have only two days to decide between supporting their children emotionally or financially.

Those whose positions are not cut will be forced into impossible workloads. Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 32BJ Vice President Roxana Rivera told the *Bay State Banner* that the number of S.J. Services employees cleaning Haymarket and North Stations between 8 a.m. and 10 p.m. will be cut from three to one.

The cut will result in a savings of less than \$4.3 million in the MBTA's operating budget, which totals more than \$2 billion per year. The laid-off workers make about \$18 per hour in one of the most expensive cities in the country. Around many subway stops, including working class neighborhoods like Ruggles, Mass. Ave., Broadway, Andrew and Central Square Cambridge, the median monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment is more than \$2,000.

ABM, which entered the Forbes 500 this year, has annual revenues of more than \$5 billion and assets of nearly \$2.2 billion. S.J. Services bills itself as "one of the largest facility maintenance and janitorial service companies in New England."

More than \$450 million, or close to 25 percent, of the MBTA's yearly operating budget goes toward paying off principal and interest to its bondholders.

A significant portion of the MBTA's operating

revenues come from the state, but large corporations which benefit from it pay less than 10 percent of the state's tax revenues, let alone any direct levy for public transportation. These include Fidelity Investments, State Street Bank, General Electric and Liberty Mutual.

The same is true of many "not-for-profit" hospitals and universities, including Harvard, Boston University and Northeastern University, along with the hospitals owned by Partners Healthcare. These don't even pay taxes on their endowments or revenue, instead paying a much smaller "payment in lieu of taxes." Partners Healthcare, which includes Brigham & Women's Hospital and Massachusetts General Hospital, has annual revenue of more than \$10 billion. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has begun paying the full cost of bus and subway passes for its staff, but the yearly cost of the program will be less than 0.002 percent of its multibillion dollar endowment.

True to form, the SEIU has so far combined stunts—a protest in which members dressed in cockroach costumes—with going hat-in-hand to a meeting with the governor. These limited and ineffective measures are foisted on workers who should instead be joining with their powerful class allies: thousands of Boston Public Schools teachers who face a concessions contract and an increase in charter schools, thousands of nurses at the Brigham & Women's hospital who recently came close to striking over pay and staffing ratios, thousands of MBTA workers who face privatization along with cuts to their wages and pensions, and other sectors which will soon come into struggle.

While Local 32BJ has boasted of a meeting with Governor Charlie Baker planned for Tuesday, the *Boston Globe* has already reported the response they should expect: "Lizzy Guyton, a spokeswoman for Baker, emphasized that it is ultimately the contractors

who make staffing decisions. ‘The administration appreciates the hard work of those who maintain MBTA facilities, but the workers negotiate with a private company.’”

This arrogance toward workers will flow through the even deeper privatization cuts being planned by the administration and MBTA management.

A September 1 report from the unelected Fiscal and Management Control Board to both houses of the state legislature threatens that in the coming year “the Board will ... analyze the variety of models in the marketplace, which range from partnering with ... manufacturers for heavy maintenance work, to full-lease modes, where the transit agency operates but does not maintain a fleet of vehicles.” The report, required yearly by the legislature as a condition of its having suspended an anti-privatization law last year, also claims that a private contractor could operate MBTA bus routes for 30 percent less than the current cost.

The *Boston Herald* confirmed two days later that what is being proposed is the privatization of bus drivers and mechanics system-wide. As many as 1,700 bus drivers and 390 mechanics would be affected, and those fortunate enough to continue working would face conditions even worse than at present.

A case in which more than 1,700 of its workers are suing the MBTA for pay when they have to travel between split shifts is dragging on in US District Court. A bus driver who finishes a route in one part of town and then has to travel to start another route two hours later would currently not be paid for that period, even though the federal Fair Labor Standards Act requires that a reasonable amount of travel time be paid. The MBTA’s lawyers, Prokauer Rose LLP, are trying to avoid the suit by refusing to grant class action status, gambling that 1,700 individual workers will not sue. U.S. District Judge Allison Burroughs responded in a hearing that “these people are owed money.”



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