Layoffs, fare hikes coming to Washington, D.C. transit system

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In late October, Washington, D.C. Metro General Manager Paul J. Wiedefeld released a proposed fiscal budget for the year beginning July 1. The proposal would see the layoff of over 1,000 of the D.C. transit system's 13,000 workers while imposing fare hikes and cuts to services.

The Washington D.C. Metro Area Transit Authority (WMATA) faces a fiscal deficit of $290 million due to a steady loss of ridership in the D.C. region. The public increasingly avoids traveling on the nation's second largest public transit system due to numerous delays, hazardous rail conditions and prohibitive fare rates.

Under the plan, nearly 300 train operators and mechanics would be laid off, with an additional 700 positions being slashed. Calling for the need to "rationalize services for today's ridership," Wiedefeld stated, "This plan has Metro doing everything in our power to get major expense categories under control while improving safety and making the trains run on time."

The average bus fare would increase by 25 cents to $2 a ride while the minimum and maximum metro fees would jump from $2.15-$5.90 to $2.25-$6, respectively. Parking fees would rise at a similar rate. MetroAccess shuttle services, which primarily serve disabled riders, would also increase to over $4 a ride.

WMATA also announced that it was considering the closure of over a dozen "low-ridership" bus routes and metro stations throughout the system. There will be increased waiting times between trains and buses, as busier stops near the center of the city would receive trains every two to four minutes while less-centralized stops would see a 15 minute off-peak hour waiting period. Wait times for buses would increase at a similar rate.

In addition, WMATA is requesting increases in localized funding from the different jurisdictions it serves--Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia. Such funding increases would further impact budget shortfalls throughout the region.

Such additional costs threaten to exacerbate Metro's loss of customers. The *Washington Post* reported last month that an estimated 1 to 4 percent of metro and bus riders would stop using public transit if the proposed fee hikes were imposed.

The proposal to slash services and lay off workers comes as Metro has enacted scheduled delays on its rail services due to safety issues. Enforced single-tracking (SafeTracking), which last month was conducted on the Red Line, the District's busiest route, has led to massive delays and an additional drop in ridership as commuters seek to avoid onerous wait times.

The SafeTracking program was enacted after a series of equipment failures and other safety issues, which have led to tragedies in the city's transit system. Nearly two years ago, a commuter died from asphyxiation and several more were hospitalized when an electrical fire caused a train to stall in a tunnel near L'Enfant Plaza in downtown D.C.

In March, Metro was forced to suspend its services for a day after the discovery of several dozen instances of frayed or defective wiring, which could potentially lead to a similar tragedy as the one that occurred at L'Enfant.

Wiedefeld has sought to present his intervention in the metro system as a demonstration of his concern for a "culture of safety first." In fact, the enforced service delays and attempts to blame transit employees for the metro system's state of disrepair have had the effect of preparing the way for permanent service cuts and reductions in the workforce.

In October, WMATA began floating a series of proposals, which would make permanent the elimination of late-night metro service. Such policies would drastically impact workers in need of public transit at off-peak hours, such as those working multiple jobs.

Also last month, WMATA announced it would file a lawsuit against the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU). The lawsuit requests that an earlier court decision allowing the union to negotiate with management over forms of punishment to be imposed on workers for alleged infractions be overturned. “The Award should… be vacated… because it is arbitrary and capricious, is irrational, is not supported by the evidence or by reason,” fumed Metro’s attorneys.

For its part, the ATU is content that rail workers should be faulted for the state of disrepair affecting the region’s infrastructure, so long as the punishments are negotiated between management and functionaries of the union.

Jackie Jeter, the president of ATU Local 689, declared to the *Washington Post*, “The Union does not necessarily object to establishing an authority-wide system of equitable discipline, but insists that it be negotiated.” Elsewhere, Jeter has praised Wiedefeld’s supposed concern for “safety culture,” saying to the *Post* in March that she was “impressed” with his conduct and management style.

Wiedefeld’s current budget proposal is based upon the expectation that labor costs for Metro will remain flat in the coming fiscal year. The ATU, which is currently in negotiations with WMATA after the labor agreement expired in June, is expected to accept additional concessions.

Statements by Metro Board Chairman Jack Evans are indicative of the attitude among metro officials. Calling for a federal takeover of the Washington, D.C. transit system last week, Evans, a Democrat, declared, “You have to have extraordinary powers--that’s the key…You have to be able to negate contracts, fire people and restructure without outside interference.”

Evans added, “[W]e have 13,000 employees who take up 70 percent of our budget… Do we have too many people? Are the pensions and retirements too generous? You change all that, you get out of the binding-arbitration situation.”

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) at the transit system in New York City, the largest in the US, has already accepted the ban on strikes and an anti-democratic binding arbitration system. In Philadelphia, where the TWU just shut down a week-long strike by nearly 5,000 workers—in order to bolster the vote for Clinton—union officials say they would prefer binding arbitration.

In addition to the comments by Evans and others, it was reported in the *Washington Post* in February that Wiedefeld had appointed Washington attorney Kevyn Orr to his supervisory team. Orr, a Democrat, presided over the municipal bankruptcy of Detroit, which cut constitutionally protected pensions for city workers who labored for decades to achieve decent retirements.

Commenting on the appointment of Orr, the *Post* quotes an anonymous WMATA official as saying, “We’ll have discussions with the jurisdictions… We might have discussions with the unions, either in the context of contracts or in the area of pensions and other benefits. There’s a potential for a lot of engagement on reducing our expenses.”

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