

Anger and opposition expressed over New York transit agency's proposed fare hikes

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In a public hearing held Thursday night in Manhattan, one of eight, workers and students expressed their anger and hostility to the New York City transit agency's proposed fare hikes. Speaker after speaker explained how the fare increases would increase their difficulty in making ends meet.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) has proposed a series of fare increases for the New York City bus and subway system, the Long Island Railroad, Metro-North Railroad, and the tolls on the various bridges and tunnels it controls averaging about four percent. They are scheduled to go into effect this March.

These fare increases will make it increasingly difficult to survive in a city where wages have fallen and stagnated (between 2008 and 2011, the median income dropped eight percent) while rents and homelessness have risen (rents have increased 25 percent between 2005 and 2011). In the home of Wall Street, economic inequality is starkly manifested with the top 1 percent taking in 39 percent of the total income while the bottom 20 percent live in poverty.

A driving force behind the fare hikes is the MTA's growing long-term bond debt that has been accumulated in order to pay for the maintenance and improvement of an infrastructure that was on the verge of collapse in the early 1980s. According to a recent report issued by State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli, this debt will reach \$41.4 billion by 2020, an increase of 43 percent over 10 years earlier. He also reported that the cost of servicing the debt will exceed \$3.1 billion, one third more than in 2015.

The MTA has increased fares and tolls five times since 2007. The comptroller's report noted that the fares have risen 45 percent between 2007 and 2015, three times faster than the rate of inflation and six times

faster than the increase of salaries. The MTA plans on another 4 percent fare hike in 2019.

The cost for a single trip is now \$2.75. A report issued by an anti-poverty group, Community Service Society of New York found that one-quarter of all poor New Yorkers cannot afford the bus and subway fares.

Many at the transit hearing described the difficulties they had paying the hefty fares.

Leslie Wells spoke at the hearing about how the fare hikes would affect "the working poor." She said, "the rising fares are attacks on the poor."

She explained, "I am a substitute teacher struggling to support a 14-year-old son. Sometimes I have to forsake my education because I cannot pay the fare. The turnstiles should be an entry point to advancement, not a barrier to it."

She told the WSWs that she is a per diem substitute teacher and even though she has both BA and MA degrees, she only made \$18,000 last year. "My income is not the same from month to month. It depends on how many hours I get. Therefore, I have to decide every day how many trips I can make on that day.

"When will these fare hikes ever end?"

There were others who testified describing similar situations where getting and holding a job is a challenge under conditions where transit fares are not affordable.

Joyce Fabrecas said at the hearing, "Low-budget families have to worry about using the transit system to get around for things such as doctors' appointments. It limits our ability to get to work. I have to walk to work; I get jobs as close to my house as possible to avoid paying fares. This limits my ability to find other kinds of work."

Michelle Carrelo testified, "I am struggling every day to pay for food, bills and student loans. I have to walk

miles just to get to work. This fare hike will hit the poor the hardest. We don't have cars to get around.”

A woman stated, “I was born in a third-world country and was brought into poverty in Brooklyn when I was young. I worked my way up to a six-figure income before the business closed.

“I found myself at the same Wall Street subway station near where I had worked having to crawl in my suit under the turnstile in order to get an interview for a job. I am a client of the Community Service Society who gave me a MetroCard (a prepaid fare card for entering the subway). All people should have the right to affordable transportation.”

The MTA is a state agency and Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo names the MTA chairman and has the most important say in the running of the authority.

The actions of state officials and board members have once again demonstrated that they serve as tools of the corporations by seeking to impose further harsh austerity measures on both the passengers and the transit workers, who have a expiration deadline coming up with the MTA in mid-January.

There has been a growing realization that these legally required public meetings serve only to provide the illusion that board members and politicians are interested in what riders have to say. This fact is expressed in the poor attendance at these hearings compared to four or five years ago, when the auditoriums were not only packed, but were sometimes the scene of protests.

The massive bond debt accumulated by the MTA is a product of the systematic starving of the system for funds by both the state and federal governments. Instead of providing the money needed for vital services, trillions of dollars have been used to bail out the banks that created the 2008 financial crisis, provide massive tax breaks for big business and to pay for an ever increasing military budget whose purpose is to defend Wall Street's predatory interests around the world.



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