

US Congress proposes governance changes for dysfunctional DC Metro system

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Under competing Congressional proposals, the federal government is seeking to punish workers employed by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) for the problems caused by the chronic underfunding of the DC area transit system.

Democratic Representative John Delaney of Maryland introduced legislation two weeks ago to amend the compact that governs and finances WMATA, popularly known as the Metro, while Republican Representative Barbara Comstock of Virginia is drafting a competing proposal.

Both proposals would force Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia to renegotiate their interstate compact within 21 months or face the threat of Congress withdrawing its support of the existing compact, resulting in the loss of \$150 million a year in federal funding.

Delaney's bill, the WMATA Improvement Act, requires that union contracts give Metro management the ability to reassign workers and subcontract work to outside contractors. It also allows the new Metro board to decide whether to maintain binding arbitration over labor disputes. The arbitration clause was put in the compact in exchange for union promises not to strike.

The legislation would also overhaul the Metro's board, which consists of eight voting members and eight alternates, by eliminating the alternates and adding the Metro chief executive to the board. If the three states can agree to these changes, they would be rewarded with an additional \$75 million a year in federal funds for 10 years, as long as they contributed \$25 million apiece in matching funds.

Comstock's alternate proposal, which is far more likely to gain approval in the Republican-controlled Congress, calls for even larger concessions from the

unions and will include no extra federal funding for Metro. It would end binding arbitration, leaving the unions free to go on strike. However, given the role of the unions over the last few decades in suppressing working class resistance, if the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), which represents most of the unionized Metro workers, called a strike, it would be aimed at venting workers' frustrations, and the union would quickly move to isolate and contain any struggle.

Both congressional proposals are in line with recommendations made last November by a DC business group, the Federal City Council, led by former DC Mayor Anthony Williams, a Democrat.

The secretive non-profit, which promotes business interests in the area by pursuing policy changes behind closed doors, called for rewriting the Metro compact to weaken union protections and shrink Metro's board of directors. It argued that the federal government should threaten to take over Metro on a temporary basis if the three states do not make these changes to the compact.

The backdrop for these proposals is the severe underfunding of the Metro system. Metro projects a \$125 million revenue shortfall in its \$1.8 billion operating budget during the current fiscal year. It faces an additional \$290 million budget shortfall in the upcoming fiscal year that begins on July 1.

Metro's General Manager Paul Wiedefeld stated on February 21 that the transit system's financial problems are reaching a tipping point. Echoing Wiedefeld, Jack Evans, Metro's Board Chairman warned, "If nobody does anything and the jurisdictions don't give us any more money, the only option I see is to cut back on service enormously."

Over the last year, Metro instituted an emergency "SafeTrack" maintenance plan to improve safety in response to a number of incidents due to years of

neglect in basic track maintenance. As a result of numerous safety hazards, chronic breakdowns, and unpredictable service, daily ridership on the Metro's rail system has plunged since 2010 by over 100,000 rides per day, or 12 percent, leading to a drop in revenue.

To close the financial gap, Metro has proposed fare increases, job cuts, and reduction of service.

Metro's general manager has proposed a 10-cent increase in the rush hour rail fare and a 25-cent hike in off-peak fares. Bus fares would go up 25 cents and the daily parking fee at Metro stations would increase 10 cents. Metro's board will decide in March on the fare increases. Fare hikes will likely push ridership even lower.

Metro plans to cut 500 positions during the upcoming fiscal year, in addition to 500 job cuts announced last year. To further reduce labor costs, starting on March 1 Metro will reduce its Customer Information Call Center hours by one and a half hours on weekdays and three hours on weekends.

The elimination of up to 36 bus routes, which will impact workers who rely on these routes to get around, is also being proposed. Metro plans to reduce rail service at rush hour, further exacerbating overcrowding on trains.

Metro lacks the funding necessary to maintain a safe system. The transit system's general manager noted at the end of 2016 that the system needs at least an extra \$1 billion over the next three years above the normal budget to meet safety and reliability standards. Funding issues have been a long-standing problem. Back in 2004, a prior Metro general manager warned that Metro faced a "death spiral" unless substantial investments were made. Despite this warning, Metro received less than half of the funding that was requested.

In another signal that Metro is going on the offensive against its workforce, last October it sued the ATU, arguing that union representatives could not demand to bargain with Metro over disciplinary policies.

Earlier this month, Metro agreed to drop the lawsuit after an arbitrator found that Metro's issuance of discipline policies are "within the scope of management rights ... and [are] not a subject of bargaining," while establishing a so-called "fresh start" system that allows some low-level infractions to be expunged from an employee's disciplinary record.

Metro has now introduced a points system where workers will be punished if they rack up a certain number of violations within a two-year period.

The ATU has already accommodated itself to Metro's attempt to scapegoat workers for the years of neglect to the transit system. "The Union does not necessarily object to establishing an authority-wide system of equitable discipline, but insists that it be negotiated," Jackie Jeter, president of ATU Local 689, told the *Washington Post* last year.

In other words, rather than challenging Metro's assertion that the workers are to blame for the dilapidated state of Metro's infrastructure, and pushing back against layoffs that will only compound safety issues, the ATU simply wants a say in how discipline is administered.

Metro's decaying infrastructure, and that of public transportation systems nationwide, is another sign that the capitalist system is incapable of addressing the basic social needs of the working class.

Along with the ongoing safety problems of the DC Metro, in the past four years, 17 derailments have occurred on rail systems overseen by the Chicago Transit Authority, 12 on lines controlled by New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority, four under the jurisdiction of the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority, and three on lines overseen by the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority, which covers Philadelphia.

The relatively modest amounts of money needed to maintain both a high-quality public transportation system and a decent standard of living for transit workers stands in stark contrast to the trillions of dollars the ruling class readily funnels into the financial system at home and expends on endless wars abroad.



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