# New York transit agency raises fares again

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On March 19, for the sixth time since 2007, the New York-based Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) increased its fares and tolls an average of 4 percent on buses, subways, commuter railroads, bridges and tunnels.

For four boroughs of the New York City bus and subway system, fares for a MetroCard that provides unlimited rides per month were raised from $116.50 to $121, and the weekly unlimited rides increased from $31 to $32.

The basic fare remains at $2.75 for a single ride. However, the bonus for multiple rides decreases from 11 percent to 5 percent, which means for most riders what previously cost $2.48 a trip now costs $2.62, a negligible discount for the cost of a single ride.

The fare for the Metro-North and Long Island Rail Road will rise about 3.75 percent.

The tolls for drivers using MTA controlled bridges and tunnels with E-Z pass go up almost 25 cents. Those who pay cash will see an increase of 6.3 to 9.1 percent.

The fare hikes will be devastating for millions of low- and middle-income workers who depend on the transit system and are already barely keeping up with rising housing, education and medical costs in one of the most expensive cities in the world to live.

A report recently issued by the state comptroller, Thomas P. Napoli, explained that fares have risen 45 percent between 2007 and 2015, three times faster than the rate of inflation, and six times faster than the increase in salaries. A report issued by an anti-poverty group, the Community Service Society of New York, found that one-fourth of all poor New Yorkers, before the current increase, were unable to afford to pay the bus and subway fares.

Nevertheless, the transit agency has scheduled yet another 4 percent fare and toll hike in 2019.

The comptroller's report found that fueling the fare increases is the MTA's huge debt, that will reach $41.4 billion by 2020, an increase of 43 percent over 10 years earlier, and that the cost of servicing or interest payments per year for this debt will exceed $3.1 billion, one-third more than in 2015. All this red ink was accumulated when the transit agency in the early 1980s embarked on continuous capital maintenance and improvement programs to save an infrastructure that was in such an advanced state of decay that the whole subway system was on the verge of collapse.

In New York, the public transportation system plays such an integral part of the ability for working people and students to get around that it was recognized that the collapse of the subway would mean the collapse of the city's economy. After years of neglect, the decision to repair it was made without providing sufficient federal, state and city government funding, thereby compelling the transit agency to finance its capital improvements through an ever-greater mountain of debt.

Although Wall Street and the city's wealthy corporations rely on the subway to transport employees, it is paid for by taxes on working people, by riders in fare and toll hikes and by transit workers through years of concession contracts.

Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 just rammed through a settlement on 38,000 New York City bus and subway workers, raising wages by a mere 2.14 percent a year. This will be eaten up by rising out-of-pocket health care costs and inflation, which is presently 2.1 percent in the New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island area. As the rate of inflation increases as expected, transit workers will experience yet another de facto wage cut.

Despite the continuous fares hikes, various statistics point to a deteriorating subway service. Passengers have experienced an increase in delays--60,000 per weekday in November 2016, an increase of 10,000 from November 2015. In 2015, trains traveled an

average of 139,916 miles without a breakdown, but in 2016, they broke down after 113,179 miles, a 16 percent decline.

Members of the Fair Fares coalition held a protest on the day the fares went up to call on New York's Democratic mayor, Bill de Blasio, to provide funding in the 2018 budget for half-priced Metro-Cards for the about 800,000 people who live below the poverty line. This is defined for a family of four as an income of $24,000 or less—a ridiculously low threshold especially for a city like New York. It has been estimated that the half-fare program would cost about $200 million a year.

However, the self-described "progressive" who ran on the slogan of opposing what he called "a tale of two cities," de Blasio has already said that there is no money in his budget for this, and that since the MTA is a state agency, it is the state legislators who should provide the discount. The MTA, for its part, has issued a statement stating it has no intention of reducing fares for the poor.

New York City is still the capital of the ultra-rich with at least 79 billionaires with a combined net worth of $364 billion. The former mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg, the 10th richest person in the world, is worth $47.5 billion by himself.

The Democratic and Republican state and city politicians who represent the interests of the giant corporations are opposed to making Wall Street or the wealthy pay for transportation or any other needed social service. On the contrary, Republicans and Democrats alike have showered the banks and big business with massive tax cuts and incentives.

The unions, which protect the privileges of the union executives, not rank-and-file workers, are allied with the big business parties. The TWU Local 100 has blocked any common struggle by transit workers and bus and subway riders while throwing its support to the state's Democratic governor, Andrew Cuomo. who, with the cooperation of the state legislators, has imposed substandard pension plans on transit workers.

While the MTA, the politicians and the media claim there is no choice but to raise fares and tolls on struggling working people, the MTA's entire anticipated budget deficit could be eliminated with a 12 percent wealth tax on the city's 79 billionaires.