

Washington, D.C. public transit authority proposes major offensive against workers

Harvey Simpkins
1 May 2017

Paul Wiedefeld, the General Manager of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), announced on April 19 an open attack on WMATA workers, proposing to cut wages, along with health, pension, and vacation benefits. Wiedefeld also proposed contracting out work, currently performed by WMATA employees, to private companies.

WMATA currently faces a fiscal deficit totaling nearly \$300 million, a funding crisis exacerbated by declining ridership. In addition, Metro has had repeated serious electrical failures in the last few years. In January 2015, an electrical malfunction caused a train to fill with smoke, resulting in the death of a passenger and the hospitalization of 84 others. In March 2016, frayed power cables caused a fire on subway tracks. Two days later, the whole system was shut down for an entire day for emergency inspections of 600 power cables in the system. Workers found at least 26 cables that needed repair.

Wiedefeld's plan will eliminate defined benefit pensions for all new hires, placing them instead in volatile 401(k) plans. Positions to be contracted out include station managers and track inspectors, at lower wages than those paid currently to WMATA employees.

The Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), the largest union representing WMATA workers, stated that Wiedefeld's proposal will result in cuts in wages and benefits totaling \$100 million.

The general manager's plan also calls for eliminating some bus routes and forcing the state governments of Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia to take on paratransit services, which provides door-to-door transportation for those whose disability prevents them from using bus or rail services.

Along with the attacks on workers and cutbacks to

Metro services, the general manager's plan requests \$500 million a year in additional funding from local governments for equipment, including new rail cars and buses, and to catch up on long-neglected maintenance. While Wiedefeld did not specify how the local governments should come up with this additional funding, business groups and local officials have proposed a regressive regional sales tax increase to foot the bill.

The Washington D.C. Metro system is the only regional transit system which does not have a single dedicated source of funding, instead obtaining its funds from multiple local and federal sources. The funding method has left the public transit system at the mercy of multiple competing jurisdictions, all seeking to cut back funding for essential social services.

The proposed cuts come on the heels of fare increases for both rail and bus service approved by Metro's Board in March. Along with the fare hikes, the Board announced that there will be fewer trains offered on five of the six rail lines, resulting in longer waits for passengers. These changes will take effect July 1.

Democratic Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia, Hillary Clinton's running mate in the 2016 presidential campaign, lauded Wiedefeld's plan to foist the problems caused by the chronic underfunding of WMATA, popularly known as Metro, onto the backs of its workers. Ignoring the fact that Metro workers would bear the brunt of Wiedefeld's attack, Kaine stated he was "open to any solutions that meet the main criteria of ensuring a reliable funding source and making positive changes to safety and governance."

Virginia's other Senator, Democrat Mark Warner, was also silent about the attack on Metro workers, stating: "This proposal appears to be a realistic and responsible contribution to the regional discussion

about how best to fix Metro.”

The Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 689 is currently in contract negotiations with Metro. It has staged token protests since Wiedefeld announced his plan. On April 27, during a Metro Board meeting, an ATU-orchestrated protest included chants of “Who moves this city? We move this city!” as the protesters exited Metro headquarters. The protestors wore T-shirts with the toothless slogans “Fix It, Fund It” and “Bargain in Good Faith.”

Some rank and file Metro workers apparently organized a “sickout” a day later, with Metro reporting 500 requests for advance absences on Friday, a rate far higher than normal. The advanced notice for absences are one of the requirements of a new policy issued by the WMATA in February that requires workers to give 72 hours’ notice that they anticipate being sick in order to take a sick day. The union denied any involvement in the protest.

Metro management threatened to discipline any employee who failed to come to work on Friday. Instead of supporting and organizing job actions by Metro’s workers to defend their pay and benefits, ATU Local 689 President Jackie Jeter’s only response to the sickout was that Metro would be forcing workers who were legitimately sick from getting medical attention and forcing sick drivers to operate trains and buses.

The ATU is concerned ultimately not with the salary and benefit cuts that Metro is proposing, but rather that management’s aggressive tactics will spark further rank and file action on the part of employees that it would be unable to control. “All I can see looming ahead of us is a fight and chaos,” Jeter told the *Washington Post*.

On the same day as the Metro Board meeting, the rail system experienced yet another major breakdown. A stray electrical current caused smoke to pour into a tunnel Thursday morning causing a massive delay on the busiest rail line, with service shut down for more than three hours. Two other electrical fires have broken out on the rail system in the prior two weeks.

In June 2016, Metro began a “SafeTrack” program to address some of the deficiencies in the system. The ongoing safety program has required the shutting down of various segments on different Metro lines, resulting in the single tracking of trains where inbound and outbound trains have to share the same track. As a

result of the numerous safety issues, regular delays, and fare hikes, daily weekday rail trips are down about 100,000 from their 2009 peak.

For all of Wiedefeld’s proclamations about safety concerns, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) reported this week of ongoing deficiencies in the safety protocol for Metro track workers. As a result of Metro’s neglect of worker safety, the FTA found repeated instances where workers were placed in serious jeopardy. The FTA has threatened to take away millions of dollars in federal funding unless the worker safety issues are addressed.

Metro management’s latest proposals again exhibit the inability of capitalism to provide even the modest amounts of money needed to maintain both a safe and reliable public transportation system and a reasonable standard of living for transit workers. While the federal government doles out billions of dollars to military contractors in the area, including Lockheed Martin, Northrup Grumman, General Dynamics, and Raytheon (maker of the 59 Tomahawk missiles recently fired on Syria at a cost of about \$60 million), and spends trillions on wars, Metro is in complete disrepair and its workers threatened with millions of dollars in wage and benefit cuts.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact