After years of neglect, New York City faces transit crisis this summer

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2 June 2017

New York State Governor Andrew M. Cuomo has warned the federal railroad Amtrak's emergency repair work at Pennsylvania Station in midtown Manhattan will "create a summer of hell" for commuters in New York City.

The work, desperately needed after years of neglect and decay, could reduce service on the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) by as much as 20 percent during rush hours in July and August. This would force many LIRR commuters to use cars instead, turning the Long Island Expressway "into a parking lot" of backed up cars stuck in traffic, Cuomo said.

The service cutbacks and delays would hit New Jersey Transit and Amtrak even harder than the LIRR, according to Mike Decataldo, vice president of operations of Amtrak's Eastern Region.

This proposed work is a result of the rapidly deteriorating conditions at Penn station—the main intercity railway terminal in New York City—which was highlighted by two recent train derailments.

On April 3, a derailment took eight tracks out of service, creating four days of huge delays. Investigators blamed the incident on weak wooden cross-ties beneath a track. An earlier derailment on March 24 was due to a mismatched rail joint. In addition, the station has been plagued by a host of problems such as power failures and signal troubles.

Penn station is owned and has been operated by the federally-funded Amtrak railroad system for the last 40 years, and it serves about 600,000 daily commuters.

Cuomo has sought to use the crisis to accelerate the privatization of Penn Station. On May 21, the governor asked President Donald Trump to provide increased federal support to repair the station and bring in a private company to replace Amtrak as the station's operator. "I know that you believe in privatization where appropriate and in this case," the Democratic governor wrote, "I think there is no doubt that it is appropriate."

The White House released a budget Tuesday that includes massive tax cuts for the rich and draconian attacks on essential programs and services for workers, the elderly and poor. The budget contains what is called a private/public infrastructure plan, which will provide a windfall to private corporations and lead to a further selloff of public assets. The new budget slashes funding to Amtrak by $760 million and eliminates the New Starts federal grant program, which was supposed to be used to help launch Amtrak's proposed $23 billion Gateway project to build a new rail tunnel between New York and New Jersey.

Amtrak is already seriously underfunded. It has been estimated that the backlog on repair work on Amtrak's Northeast Corridor, of which Penn Station is a part, will cost $38 billion, New York's two senators have said. There were 178 derailments between 2010 and 2016 and 41 percent were caused by track problems according to federal statistics.

Cuomo, as well as many other politicians, have sought to blame Amtrak for Penn station's problems, and the state senate voted 55-6 for a bill that would order the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to stop paying Amtrak until December 31, or until on-time performance reaches 95 percent for a month. If this bill became law, it would make it more difficult for the financially strapped controller of the station to make repairs.

The MTA is responsible for the New York City bus and subway system, the two commuter railroads, Metro-North, and the Long Island Railroad, as well as nine bridges and tunnels. The transit authority has been experiencing a service crisis no less severe than Penn

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Station's.

Delays on the New York City subway system have increased to more than 70,000 per month from about 28,000 a month in 2012. Overcrowding is being credited for about a third of the problems. However, just in this and last month alone, there were several serious mechanical problems, including two power failures, which caused serious delays and the re-routing of seven lines. In April, there was a signal problem, a track fire, and a power failure that led to a near shutdown of much of the system.

Despite the agency's attempt to blame the rise in delays on the increase in ridership, there were nearly 6 million fewer riders in 2016 than in 2015. (It has been estimated that the city subway system carries about 1.7 billion riders a year).

Furthermore, subway car breakdowns have increased significantly. The average distance traveled before cars break down is now only about 112,000 miles, a significant decline compared to about 200,000 miles in November 2010.

Under the pressure of complaining riders, the MTA has recently announced a $20 million plan to deal with delays caused by sick passengers and various mechanical problems—a plan that has been widely criticized as woefully inadequate.

The MTA is a state agency effectively controlled by the governor who has been pointing the finger of blame for the transit problems at the city's mayor and fellow Democrat, Bill de Blasio. The mayor has likewise absolved himself of all responsibility and maintains that the blame for the crisis falls exclusively on Cuomo's shoulders.

The system was on the verge of collapse in the early 1980s with aging and deteriorating trains, tracks, signals and stations. When it was realized that the end of the subway and commuter railroads would essentially lead to shutting down New York City, the home of Wall Street, it was decided to pour tens of billions of dollars into repairing and updating the system. However, due to underfunding by the federal, state and city governments, the authority is suffocating in mountains of debt and funneling vast sums to the large financial institutions that control the transit system's bonds.

Despite the money spent, state studies issued a few years ago have concluded that the nearly trillion-dollar transit system has been depreciating faster than the agency has dedicated resources to maintain it.

While the governor has committed $8.3 billion for the current capital 2015-19 improvement plan of $29.5 billion, he has not identified how the state will come up with the money. The MTA has just recently voted to increase the capital plan by nearly $3 billion. While the work is clearly necessary, due to the lack of government funding, the MTA's debt will increase to about $42.5 billion, according to the agency's chief financial officer, Robert E. Foran.

For the last MTA capital plan, the state contributed a mere $770 million. Under pressure from Cuomo, Mayor De Blasio has agreed to put up $1.8 billion for the capital plan. However, earlier this year, the governor and the state legislature reduced state funding by $65 million a year from the agency's operating budget.

The agency now has a debt of roughly $36.5 billion and nearly 20 percent of the authority's operating budget is used to service this capital improvement debt. The MTA has increased fares six times since 2007, three times the rate of inflation. This has put enormous strain on the poorest New Yorkers who need to ride the system to find or get to work or visit health professionals. More fare hikes have been scheduled in the years ahead.

At the same time, the MTA has accelerated the attack on the wages, health benefits, pensions and working conditions of the transit system's 38,000 subway and bus workers.

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