

New York mayor rejects discount transit fares plan for poor residents

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New York City's self-proclaimed "progressive" Democratic mayor, Bill de Blasio, declined last week to fund a \$50 million-dollar pilot program that would provide half-priced MetroCards to low-income New Yorkers, as part of the fiscal 2018 budget.

Currently, a single-ride full-fare MetroCard costs \$2.75. An unlimited monthly pass costs \$121. Some reduced fares are given to groups such as seniors and primary and high-school students during the school year. In addition, the city provides about \$50 million dollars' worth of free or discounted fares through a variety of programs.

The non-profit Community Service Society and the advocacy group Riders Alliance have campaigned for the reduced-fare program, which has been dubbed the Fair Fares initiative. The proposed program was passed by the New York City Council on June 6 and had the support of a wide range of advocacy groups and trade unions.

The advocates of the program estimate that the initiative would eventually cost the city roughly \$194 million to provide discounted MetroCards for about 360,000 people. Over 800,000 New Yorkers could potentially qualify for the program, with the vast majority dependent on public transportation.

De Blasio, who was elected in 2014 on a pledge to address the staggering level of social inequality in America's largest city, has consistently refused to support the Fair Fares initiative. Last January, in an interview with the *Gotham Gazette*, he said, "We just can't afford [the Fair Fares initiative]. It's just not something we can get into the city budget. And also I think it's a state responsibility. I think the state can't have it both ways on the MTA [Metropolitan Transit Authority]."

According to a report titled "The Transit

Affordability Crisis," put out last year by the Community Service Society and Riders Alliance, hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers are adversely affected by the high cost of public transit.

The report notes that for more than 300,000 workers in New York, transit expenses exceeded 10 percent of family income, and many households are forced to choose between transportation and other necessities.

The report also stated that the majority of lower-income workers in New York are largely dependent on public transportation. Among poor New Yorkers—defined as living below the federal poverty level, which is \$11,880 for an individual and \$24,300 for a family of four—only 15 percent relied on a car for transport, and only 30 percent had access to a car in 2014.

Similarly, 56 percent of near-poor New York City residents—individuals in households making less than twice the federal poverty level—also depended on the subway and bus system.

The report further detailed that 28 percent of individuals in poor households and 25 percent in near-poor households had often been unable to afford subway or bus fares in 2015. The number was even higher for working-age New Yorkers with less than \$100 in savings, with four out of 10 saying they had difficulty affording transit fares.

The high cost of transit compounds the crisis facing large sections of workers who struggle to find work and affordable housing.

Roughly a quarter of low-income working-age New Yorkers surveyed in the report stated that the cost of subway and bus fares had prevented them from receiving medical care. Twenty-seven percent of low-income individuals also said the high cost of fares prevented them from looking for a job farther from

home.

Poverty often prohibits workers from being able to purchase more cost-effective transit options, such as a 30-day unlimited ride pass. For most workers in New York, a monthly fee of \$121 is onerous. The number of employers who subsidize this cost has been steadily declining for decades.

According to the report, near-poor New York residents use 30-day unlimited passes only 18 percent of the time.

According to the de Blasio administration's own report, "New York City Government Poverty Measure 2005-2015," costs for commuting have the second-highest effect on raising the city's poverty rate after medical expenses.

De Blasio's failure to curb growing transit costs for the city's working class is consistent with his record of posing as a defender of poor and disenfranchised residents while serving the interests of the very wealthiest New Yorkers and the police.

The city has continued to implement a policy of "Broken Windows" policing, based on cracking down on minor crimes, particular fare-beating or turnstile-hopping in the MTA.

According to data released by the New York Police Department (NYPD), there were 6,217 arrests for theft of services in the MTA within the first three months of this year. This is a 16.7 percent increase compared to the same period last year. In 2016, the NYPD arrested 24,591 people for theft of services on the MTA and issued 67,166 civil summonses. The NYPD has refused to release demographic information on the arrests.

A breakdown of arrests by neighborhood would undoubtedly reveal that fare-beating is a crime of poverty. In the borough of the Bronx, the poorest urban county in the United States, it is not uncommon to see workers and youth boarding a bus by the back door (where the driver is not present) since they cannot afford to pay for a ride. A ubiquitous sight in the New York City subway stations is the man or woman, often young, requesting a "swipe" from a commuter exiting a turnstile who may have an unlimited ride card.

The high cost of traveling on the MTA comes at a time when the system's infrastructure is in an advanced state of decay. The price of a fare will buy a worker a place on an overcrowded subway car, along with undependable service and increasingly long delays,

sometimes in the middle of a tunnel without light or air conditioning. The experience is complete with filthy, vermin-infested stations, malfunctioning public address systems, and heavily armed police stationed at major transit nexuses.

The failure of the de Blasio administration to provide minor reforms for hundreds of thousands of workers living in poverty is a testament to the political bankruptcy of the Democratic Party. Within four years, his supposedly left-wing administration has virtually dropped any pretense of fighting for the disenfranchised. The mayor now serves as an apologist for the immense inequality and impoverishment in the city, while working to embolden the police to crack down on workers.



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