

Governor declares “state of emergency” for New York City transit system

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Last Thursday, New York State Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo signed an executive order declaring a “state of emergency” on the state’s Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), the subway and regional rail system that services the New York City metropolitan area.

The measure is largely political theatre aimed at assuaging the anger of commuters who have experienced months of delays and life-threatening accidents on the system’s three commuter rail lines, particularly the Long Island Railroad (LIRR) and the New York City subway.

The governor’s declaration follows a subway derailment last Tuesday, June 27, in which 39 passengers were injured and about 800 walked off an A train onto the tracks in a dark and dangerous tunnel. Passengers left the train after it careened into a wall releasing smoke that impaired their ability to breathe.

Earlier last month, an F train was stuck between stations for an hour without air conditioning causing riders to try to open locked doors to escape the sweltering heat. In January, a Long Island railroad train derailed injuring 37 people.

Last week, due to a power failure, hundreds of commuters were stranded on the LIRR for two hours causing crippling delays and cancellations into Manhattan’s Penn Station throughout the morning. Emergency personnel had to move a rescue train up to the disabled one to transfer about 500 passengers. Later that evening there were even more delays. The LIRR suspended service for more than two hours beginning around 5:00 PM because of the loss of power on 12 tracks at Penn station.

Also, last week, a Metro-North commuter train broke down when an overhead wire was damaged, causing delays of up to 70 minutes on the New Haven, Connecticut line. The Hudson Bergen Light Rail service in New Jersey was suspended because of an accident between a train and a vehicle. Although it is run by the

New Jersey Transit Authority (NJTA)—also in a deep crisis—the train line services the New York City metropolitan area and delays have a direct impact on the New York system.

Because of many years of neglect, and, more immediately, a series of recent derailments and breakdowns, emergency repairs at Penn Station, which is controlled by Amtrak, the federal commuter railroad, are set to begin July 10. This will create even more delays in the New York, Long Island, and New Jersey areas, in what the media has dubbed a “summer of hell.”

The MTA, the largest transportation network in North America, is a state agency essentially run by the New York governor, who has now given his newly appointed MTA Chairman Joseph Lhota 60 days to assess capital needs for train cars, tracks, and signals.

As part of his state of emergency Cuomo has said he would loosen bureaucratic impediments in the MTA to purchasing equipment. He also claimed he would add \$1 billion to the transit agency’s capital program, although he has not said how he would come up with the money. According to Cuomo administration officials, the funds would have to be approved by the state legislature.

One MTA board member, Veronica Vanterpool, has said that Cuomo has not yet explained where the \$7.3 billion of the \$8.3 billion committed by the state to the MTA’s current \$32.5 billion capital plan will come from. The corporate media have echoed this concern and it is widely believed that there is no money in the state coffers to save the transit system.

The amount proposed by Cuomo is a drop in the bucket for the metropolitan transit system, which the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) says is “being forced to stretch beyond capacity—more riders, aging vehicles, capital funding gaps, and structures built over 100 years ago that must be more resilient today than ever before.” The ASCE says New York City’s transit system needs at

least \$68 billion over the next 20 years along “with new technologies to replace aging system components and improve the quality of transit service.”

Cuomo’s solution to the crisis has been to appoint Lhota to head the MTA. Lhota served in a variety of positions for the reactionary New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, among them chief rat catcher. He ran the MTA under billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and then was the Republican candidate in 2013 in the New York City mayoral election, running against Democrat and current Mayor Bill De Blasio.

During his previous reign at the MTA, Lhota raised fares and facilitated the very crisis that has erupted the last few months. He also brings back to the MTA the talent of blackguarding MTA workers and blaming them for nearly any malfunction in the antiquated system.

On the day of the derailment, Lhota immediately attributed the incident to “human error.” The MTA then issued a statement stating the cause of the derailment “was an improperly secured piece of replacement rail that was stored on the tracks. Storing equipment in between tracks is a common practice employed by railroads across the country to accelerate rail repairs. The key to this being an effective and safe practice is making sure that the extra equipment is bolted down, which does not appear to have happened in this case.” The next day, the MTA suspended two supervisors without pay.

It is well known by those familiar with the system that top management is constantly pressuring supervisors and workers alike to cut corners for the sake of productivity or make it appear that productivity or performance looks better than it really is.

The crisis in the New York City subway system has been accelerating in recent years as delays have increased from 28,000 a month in 2012 to 70,000 a month last year. The lifespan of train cars before breakdown has become shorter, from an average of every 200,000 miles in November 2010 to 112,000 miles today.

These delays are the result of an inadequately maintained and outmoded signal system, tracks, and trains, especially on the A and C lines. It took decades of neglect for the transit system to reach the current state of crisis not just structurally, but also financially. The subway system was approaching a complete collapse during the fiscal crises in the 1970s when the city almost went bankrupt.

The first capital improvement program began in 1981, but over the years not enough money has been invested to properly maintain and replace the signal system—which

has technology that dates back to 1904—as well as aging cars and tracks. Because of a lack of funding, the transit agency has been continuously borrowing and now owes wealthy bondholders \$40 billion. As a result, 18 percent of the operating budget is earmarked for debt servicing and this percentage will increase with the ever-growing debt.

In addition to negotiating—with the assistance of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) and other unions—a series of concession contracts against transit workers, the MTA has made passengers pay more for inferior service by raising fares every two years.

A state of emergency indeed exists in New York transit. The derailment of the A train last week was a warning. It was fortunate that the passengers escaped relatively unharmed, but the next accident may be more tragic. Every day millions are unable to get to work in time, and hundreds of thousands are stretched to the limit simply to pay the fare on a failing system.

Any viable resolution of this crisis would begin with canceling the immense debt to the wealthy bondholders and other investors, and utilizing these resources to carry out a massive infrastructure repair.

But the political establishment is paralyzed and neither the governor—who boasted last year that he had cut corporate taxes in the state to the lowest level since 1968—nor the federal authorities, dominated by two thoroughly corrupt Wall Street parties, have any viable plan to address this crisis.

In a city that is the principal financial center of global capitalism, home to 82 billionaires and thousands more high net worth individuals (those with a million dollars in assets beside a home), the decay of mass transit and the dangers posed to millions of working people is a matter of indifference to the corporate elite and its political servants.



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