

Boston Transit: Control Board fiddles while the Red Line burns

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Three years after a series of February 2015 snow storms shut down Boston's public transportation system multiple times, an unelected Fiscal and Management Control Board (FMCB) has privatized sections of the organization, imposed a wage freeze with union collaboration, cut overtime hours and attacked workers' pensions, but made no real improvements to the decrepit infrastructure at the root of the 2015 crisis.

On December 29, during a record-breaking cold snap, a 70-year-old trolley stalled on the tracks between Ashmont Station and Mattapan. The driver of a trolley going in the opposite direction stopped to help, but his train was rammed by one behind it, injuring 17 people. 16 were taken to hospitals. The trolleys are so old that replacement parts sometimes need to be obtained from museums, according to the *Boston Globe*.

The next day the MBTA issued a statement blaming the driver who had stopped to help; nothing further has been reported. Boston Carmen's Union Local 589, affiliated to the Amalgamated Transit Union, has not returned a phone call from the *World Socialist Web Site* asking about plans for the defense of the driver.

Also on December 29, a section of Orange Line subway rail over the Mystic River cracked in the cold, necessitating the use of shuttle buses for more than four hours, including the morning rush hour. Malden, at the northern end of the Orange Line, is home to many immigrant workers who rely on public transportation. To repair the track, maintenance workers had to spend four hours outdoors in single-degree (Fahrenheit) cold. The MBTA has spent only \$100 million on winter-related infrastructure projects over the past three years.

Steve Wynn, the finance chair of the Republican National Committee, is building a \$2.4 billion casino in Everett near where the rail cracked, but will contribute

only \$7.35 million toward the operation of additional Orange Line trains over 15 years, according to *masslive.com*. Wynn is notorious for telling a group of investors in 2016 that, "nobody likes being around poor people, especially poor people. So we try and make the [casino] feel upscale for everyone."

The combined net worth of the 50 richest people with homes in Massachusetts is more than \$134 billion, and 34 of them are billionaires. Among them are Fidelity Investments Chairman and MIT Corporation member Abigail Johnson (\$16 billion), and New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft (\$6.2 billion). An estimated \$5.88 billion is needed over the next five years to improve the T's infrastructure.

Despite the MBTA's decrepit infrastructure, its management and Massachusetts Secretary of Transportation Stephanie Pollack insisted on running the system during a January 4 snowstorm in an attempt to prove that things aren't as bad as they are. Referring to Orange Line cars that needed maintenance during and after the storm, Pollack said, "yeah, the cars are three years older but we got them back in service faster" than in 2015, according to the *Boston Globe*.

The FMCB's most recent annual report boasts that the use of a private Human Resources company "has helped the T reduce overtime expenses and absenteeism." However, workers are still bearing the brunt of the winter problems. A statement posted to the MBTA's web site three days after the storm admits that "MBTA operations, shops, work crews, and field personnel are working under extreme arctic and potentially unsafe conditions, and many have been on-call or on-duty since the cold spell started before the New Year."

MBTA General Manager Luis Manuel Ramírez, whose previous experience consists of signing false and

misleading financial statements as President and CEO of Global Power Equipment Group, tried to excuse the MBTA's failing infrastructure by tweeting on January 6 that "no system in North America is designed for Siberian temperatures that last more than a few hours. In fact, fire hydrants are freezing, house pipes are freezing." After this excuse failed to stem complaints, he blocked a number of journalists from his Twitter account and then created a new account to try to hide from criticism.

The morning after the storm, commuter rail trains coming into South Station were delayed by as much as an hour and had to wait on the tracks for platforms to open up. Only 37 percent of Commuter Rail trains were on time January 5, and at least two-dozen were cancelled.

David Scorey, General Manager of the private contractor Keolis, issued an apology but no details on how it would prevent future breakdowns, according to the *Globe*. Pollack and the MBTA are now threatening not to renew the company's contract for managing the Commuter Rail system, but that contract—worth a total of \$2.7 billion—does not expire until June 2022. Scorey's apology—that "our customers deserve better and we apologize for our performance"—might be an accurate statement, but is worthless to the MBTA's riders and workers.

Bad weather is not needed to demonstrate the system's continuing failures. Three days after the storm, an underground signal problem unrelated to the snow caused a suspension of service on the Green Line's E branch. Also on January 7, a disabled train caused "severe" delays on the Braintree branch of the Red Line.

Hundreds of new Red and Orange Line cars are being built, but will not be completely deployed until 2022. In the meantime, the FMCB's Strategic Plan Timeline allocates only \$30 million for maintenance and reliability of existing cars—some of which are more than 50 years old—for all of calendar years 2017 and 2018.

On January 8 a smoking insulator on the Orange Line tracks near Community College caused delays and required a response from the Boston Fire Department.

On January 11 a Red Line train stalled near the Charles/MGH stop during the evening commute, causing delays on the line for more than three hours. One rider posted on Twitter that "I'm almost out of

angry things to say about the #MBTA #redline." Another posted that "everyday that I have commuted this week, I have encountered mod[erate] to sev[ere] delays, adding anywhere from 39-120 min to my commute from Quincy."

On the evening of January 15 a station fire at Harvard Square filled tunnels and platforms with foul-smelling smoke and caused delays of more than 30 minutes.



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