

Boston: MBTA infrastructure and working conditions worsen

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Public transportation in the Boston area is increasingly unsafe for both its workers and riders. The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) operates under an unelected Fiscal and Management Control Board (FMCB) whose highest priority is privatization and a funding structure that sucks more than \$400 million of debt service per year out of its operating budget.

The record snowfall of February 2015 shut down the entire MBTA multiple times. Three years later the system is still in crisis, not because of weather—which in fact has been relatively dry and unseasonably warm—but because of inadequate infrastructure funding in a state that has 34 billionaires.

On Wednesday morning the last car of a six-car Red Line subway train derailed underground when its motor failed. Andrew Station filled with smoke, and a rider on the train described the experience to the *Boston Globe*: “[T]he train hit what felt like a bump, then it kept bucking off the tracks, like flying up then slamming back down. Sparks were flying outside the window. Then the window started imploding. It happened in pulses, shooting shards of glass into the train right where I was sitting.”

While no injuries were reported, service between the Broadway and JFK/UMass stations was not restored for eight hours, and commutes were delayed by as much as 90 minutes as hundreds of riders had to wait outside in the streets for shuttle buses.

The subway cars were at least 30 years old. Fifty-eight of the UTDC 1700 series cars on the Red Line were built in the late 1980s. Seventy Pullman-Standard 1500 and 1600 cars, built in the late 1960s, are still in use on the line. New Red Line cars are currently on order, but will not be fully deployed until 2022. In the meantime, the FMCB has allocated only \$30 million

for all of calendar years 2017 and 2018 toward maintenance of the existing heavy rail fleet. On average, this amount is only 3 percent of the debt service paid to predatory bondholders every year.

Less than a week before the nightmare ride that ended in Andrew Station, the doors of another Red Line train were stuck shut for four stops as it went outbound toward Alewife Station during the morning commute, with riders trapped inside. The emergency intercom did not work—frightened passengers had to call the Transit Police on a cellphone—and two people were needed to pull the emergency brake after it, too, stuck.

The Green Line, which is classified as light rather than heavy rail, is also in dangerous disrepair. At the end of November, Protran Technology released a report, commissioned by the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities Transportation Oversight Division, on the condition of Green Line tracks, which total nearly 46 miles. Protran found that “by having only the minimal amount of resources available, Track Management” is not able to address problems “until they reach ‘red level.’” More than 2,000 defects in track geometry existed as of February 2017, and the inspectors found rotten ties, corroded or cracked rails, and “shelves” worn into the rails by trolley wheels. Surface deviations in the track were as deep as 2.5 inches in places.

Even when infrastructure failures are less severe, they worsen the commutes of the hundreds of thousands of riders who take the “T” to work. The *Boston Herald* has found that in the less than two months since the beginning of the year, “the MBTA has sent out at least 275 tweets about delays caused by issues with trains, signals or switches.”

The Green Line Maintenance of Way (MOW) Division is given an operating budget of only \$22

million and a capital budget of less than \$20 million per year. Only three crews per night and two per day are assigned to the track maintenance. Maintenance workers are diligent and, according to Protran's report, "the MBTA staff is making a considerable effort to try to up-grade the system and to maintain the system to at least a restricted operational level but their resources are stretched to the limit."

Nevertheless, the FMCB and its supporters in the local media continue to attack workers. The MBTA has once again released its yearly payroll, with the *Boston Globe* and the *Boston Herald* braying about workers who take home more than \$100,000 including overtime. However, The average T worker makes only \$86,180 in one of the most expensive cities in the country.

Moreover, the data show that 40 of the 210 MBTA employees who made more than \$150,000 last year were either upper management or members of the Transit Police. Five police sergeants and two lieutenants are currently making more than \$200,000.

Approximately 450 bus maintenance mechanics are not nearly so fortunate. Under threat of privatization, Machinists Local 264 accepted a concessions contract at the beginning of the month that gives an insulting 1.5 percent raise for each of the next two years and drastically cuts the starting pay of new workers.

Under the previous contract a worker started off at 75 percent of the top wage and could move up to 80 percent after 3-6 months. He or she could expect to reach the top step within two years. Now Step 1 will start at only 61 percent of the top wage, move to 65 percent after six months, and to 72 percent six months after that. Management's report to the FMCB boasted that only 10-20 percent of workers hired under the new contract will be able to reach the top wage at all.

In order to wring these cuts from workers, management promised that it will not privatize the maintenance of the system's existing 955 buses. If the size of the fleet increases, however, this arrangement will erode. The humiliation written into this contract can be seen in the fact that it will cut costs next year by only \$4 million, out of a total operating budget of nearly \$2 billion.

Despite the grandstanding of politicians like Representative Joe Kennedy, the Democrats and the unions are on board with the MBTA's attacks on

workers. FMCB member Brian Lang is the President of hotel and food service union UNITE HERE Local 26.



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