

As transit crisis continues

Fare evasion increases on New York City subways and buses

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The New York City Transit Authority (NYCT)—part of the state’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA)—released a report last month pointing to a rapid increase in fare evasion by passengers on the city’s transit system, the largest in the US. According to the official figures, 208,000 subway riders do not pay their fare on a given day, along with another 348,000 bus passengers. Both figures are reported to have increased about 100,000 since 2013. The subway fare evasion rate has increased to 3.2 percent, compared to 1.8 percent in recent years, according to the MTA. The rate on the buses is much larger, about 16 percent, with many riders using the back doors to enter without paying.

The transit agency is using the fare evasion report to justify or deflect anger over a fare increase that is scheduled for March, one of a regular series that have taken place at two-year intervals. The stage is also being set for a law-and-order crackdown, one that will be aimed at pitting workers and sections of the middle class against the poor.

In fact, the official figures should be taken as only a rough estimate, and the MTA may be seeking to exaggerate fare evasion for its own purposes. The claims are substantiated only by an eight-slide presentation with little information on methodology. It is unclear how the decline in ridership has been factored in, and the data for other years are from the fourth quarter of the fiscal year, while 2018 figures are based on third-quarter numbers.

Whatever the precise level, however, there is little doubt that fare evasion has been increasing, and that should come as no surprise. Millions of workers in the city have been totally left behind by the frenzied real

estate boom and the growth of the upper middle class in Manhattan and a handful of neighborhoods in other boroughs. The working poor, not to mention the unemployed, face difficulty in paying the \$2.75 fare while juggling the costs of other necessities like food, housing and health care.

There is also barely suppressed anger over the obvious gulf between the conditions of the working-class majority and the conspicuous consumption of the very wealthy and the upper middle class. A 2016 Economic Policy Institute report found that the top 1 percent of people in the state accumulated 45 times the income of the bottom 99 percent. Income inequality is most extreme in Manhattan, along with adjoining sections of Brooklyn and Queens.

The financial aristocracy and the layers closest to it have the means to avoid public transit entirely, opting for taxis and rideshare apps. This gulf is epitomized in the helipad that Jeff Bezos, Amazon CEO and the world’s richest man, will have when Amazon’s second headquarters is constructed in Long Island City, Queens.

Under these conditions hard-pressed passengers are increasingly indignant at having to pay for inconsistent, delayed and dilapidated service. Almost 30 percent of the MTA’s rolling stock is over 30 years old, and there were 60,000 delays in 2017—up from 23,000 in 2012. Bus ridership declined by 16.5 percent from 2008 to 2017.

The MTA’s response, beyond a repair and upgrade program that could best be described as too little, too late, is to set the stage for a law-and-order crackdown. New York City Transit Authority President Andy Byford, who is responsible for the MTA’s buses and

subways, is leading the way.

Recent weeks have seen statements from Byford, accompanied by articles in the *New York Times*, blaming the increase in fare evasion for the \$1.6 billion deficit the MTA expects to face in three years. The MTA's stated amount for lost revenue this year is \$215 million—less than 14 percent of its projected annual deficit, and less than 1.3 percent its current annual operating budget.

In comparison, estimates for necessary upgrades and repairs for the subways run into the billions of dollars, with one recent report from an MTA task force estimating \$60 billion. Byford's own Fast Forward plan has been given a price tag of \$40 billion.

When reporters asked Byford why he was focusing on fare evasion when it makes up only a small fraction of the MTA's budget, he responded, "I've got to be fair." In other words, he is telling transit riders to direct their anger at those who don't pay the fare, rather than at the Wall Street billionaires and their servants in government who are responsible both for the city's high poverty rate as well as its decaying transit system.

Lawrence Schwartz, an MTA board member close to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, said, "We need to send a very loud and clear message that we may need you to pay more, but we're going to improve the reliability and the performance and we're going to crack down on the people that somehow have been scamming the system and getting away with not paying."

These officials, along with the media, have begun harking back to the 1990s, when then-Police Commissioner William Bratton pioneered the "broken windows" method of policing, criminalizing the poor and targeting violations such as fare evasion.

Byford has specifically blamed the reported spike in fare evasion on the 2017 decision by the Manhattan district attorney's office to stop criminally prosecuting people who evade paying the fare, instead issuing summonses calling for a fine of \$100.

The District Attorney, in defense of this policy, issued a fact sheet claiming that the policy of substituting summonses for arrests has actually been cost-effective. "...[S]tops for turnstile jumping have gone up by 25%, because the new policy has actually freed up police officers to stop more offenders," according to the *Gothamist*. The DA's office also

claimed that its policy had saved the city money, since issuing a \$100 ticket avoids the cost of criminally prosecuting someone on fare evasion charges.

There have also been claims that crackdowns on fare evasion fall disproportionately on minority New Yorkers; 89 percent of those arrested at subway turnstiles in the first half of 2018 were black or Hispanic. This figure points to the social crisis facing the poorest sections of the working class. The disparity, as in similar indices, is primarily due to the higher levels of poverty, unemployment and low-wage jobs.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, who was first elected in 2013 on the slogan of a "Tale of Two Cities" and a promise to reverse inequality, now claims the mantle of law and order. He even opposed the DA's decision to halt fare evasion arrests, saying at the time, "There's no way in hell anyone should be evading the fare. That would create chaos."

De Blasio's steady rightward trajectory proves yet again the impossibility of defending the social rights of the working class through the Democratic Party. The mayor and the transit bosses will do nothing about inequality because the system they represent requires it.

The greatest fear of de Blasio, in contrast to his phony campaign rhetoric from a few years ago, is that the social anger that finds a distorted reflection in fare evasion will link up with working-class opposition nationally, reflected in the movements of teachers, Amazon, auto workers and millions of others, which are in turn connected to recent anti-austerity protests in France, Tunisia, Sudan and elsewhere.

The necessary resources exist to repair the transit system, guarantee good jobs for transit workers and provide free or low-cost public transit for all. These resources can only be secured, however, through the political struggles of the working class, armed with a socialist and internationalist program.



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