

Boston: Unanimous opposition to MBTA fare hike at public hearing

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The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) is planning to impose fare increases averaging 6.3 percent on its bus, subway and commuter rail riders effective July 1.

Riders and advocates who packed a public meeting in Boston on Wednesday night expressed unanimous opposition to the plan in remarks directed to the system's general manager and the vice chair of its unelected Fiscal and Management Control Board (FMCB).

Typical were the remarks of Reginald Clark, a rider who is legally blind, who said in his testimony, "If you're going to raise the fares on poor people who can't afford it then that's not going to do any good, that's going to make it worse. You need to think of the people that can't afford it. And ask us what ideas we have.

The MBTA—known as the "T"—estimates that the hikes will bring in \$32 million in new revenues next year, less than one-tenth of the debt service paid out annually to predatory lenders that invest in the bonds issued to fund necessary maintenance and expansion programs. These debt payments, which at nearly \$500 million per year are the second largest cost category in the operating budget, will grow even larger as short-term federal funding for MBTA capital projects runs out.

Republican Governor Charlie Baker is defending the fare hike with the argument that Massachusetts taxpayers, many of whom don't use the MBTA, already contribute \$1 billion to it annually. What he doesn't say is that all of this money comes from a regressive sales tax which is hardest on workers and the poor.

The \$8 billion needed to fix the rundown public transportation system could easily be found in the

wealth of the state's millionaires and billionaires. Their hoards, however, are considered off limits by the Democratic Party-controlled state legislature and the press. Fidelity Investments President Abigail Johnson, who has made much of her fortune from 401(k) plans that the working class is forced to invest in in lieu of receiving pensions, is worth more than \$16 billion. New England Patriots owner Bob Kraft has seen his wealth grow to \$6.6 billion.

The fourth annual report of the FMCB, released in December, put its priorities bluntly: in fiscal year 2018, wages were cut by \$100 million while debt service payments came in only \$33 million below budget.

While hiking fares, the FMCB is also preparing an attack on the defined-benefit pensions of MBTA workers. The pension fund receives some contributions from the state, along with the workers' mandated contributions.

The *Boston Globe*, the area's putatively liberal newspaper, has been leading the support for this attack on a vital benefit, including an editorial that compared the pension plan to a Ponzi scheme. Yet the *Globe* reported last week that Carmen's Union Local 589 has been secretly negotiating with management since last August about "restructuring" the plan. Local President James O'Brien told the *Globe* that "everything is on the table." Two years ago Local 589 agreed to reopen a contract and give up a scheduled raise in exchange for a promise that management would curtail privatization.

While the 6.3 percent fare hike will not improve the operation or safety of the MBTA's overcrowded subways and buses, riders would encounter worsening congestion if they switched to driving as a commuting method. A business group called A Better City issued a report earlier this month documenting that the Massachusetts workforce has grown by 121,000 people

in the past year and that “already the third densest state in the nation, Massachusetts is expected to add 500,000 more people over the next 20 years.”

Egan Millard, who works in Cambridge but can’t afford to live closer than Weymouth, takes the commuter rail to the Red Line. In his testimony at Wednesday’s hearing he said, “We’re already paying too much for such abysmal service. The \$217.75 I now pay every month for my subway and commuter rail pass is a real hardship for me. And what does it get me? Commuter rail service so infrequent I have to plan my entire day or sometimes week around it, some kind of delay almost every day, severe overcrowding *every single day*, and truly appalling conditions in many stations.”

“If anything, we should be getting refunds,” Egan said. “For the time spent standing on subway platforms when multiple, completely full trains pass by that we couldn’t get on, for the cab and Uber fares we paid because we needed to get to work on time and you let us down ... for the hours of work and school, job interviews, the family events, the expensive flights we missed because you didn’t live up to your promise. I’ve lost at this point days of my life that I can’t get back, and I am concerned for my safety when the train I am riding sounds and feels as if it is literally about to fall apart.”

Addressing the MBTA general manager and FMCB vice chair, Darlene Lombas, the Executive Director of Community Labor United, said, “We are mothers and fathers trying to go to work to support our families. We are students trying to get to school; we are elders trying to make our doctors’ appointments.”

“We think your equity analysis must be flawed if it says the fare increase won’t disproportionately affect or harm low income riders,” she said. “In fact, for most working class families transportation is the second largest expense, just behind housing costs and even more than healthcare.”

Other speakers called for free public transportation, and to “Free the T!” There was applause when a member of Veterans for Peace said money should be invested in public transportation rather than wars in the Middle East, putting forward the slogan, “End the war, and fix the T!”

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed C.C. Williams before the meeting. “This is definitely

affecting working class people, people of low socioeconomic class,” she said. “Because if you’ve read recent statistics, a lot people in the city are making under \$40,000 and this recent fare increase could possibly throw their budget out of whack. And you have to keep in mind the transportation costs along with housing costs, food costs, healthcare costs. So, it all adds up to deeper holes in the pockets of the consumers.”

As of 2016, the Boston metropolitan area had the tenth worst income inequality level in the United States, according to the Brookings Institution. In former working-class cities like Somerville, apartments converted to condominiums are selling for more than \$1 million, while the 2016 household income for those in the 20th percentile was only \$30,328.

Landon Lemoine told the meeting, “The crisis that’s happening in this city is the widening wage gap. It is becoming so hard to survive and live in this city with a normal job. Increasing the cost to get to that job is the complete opposite of what we need as a solution.”

“It’s the server, teacher, volunteer, mom, dad, who I speak to everyday on these wonderful morning and afternoon commutes,” he said, “that are already today questioning the viability of staying in Boston to build a life and a family. It’s this type of small increase that will make such a difference for these folks and, in fact, put Boston out of reach.”



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