

New York City transit agency raises fare, threatens budget cuts

Alan Whyte
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The New York City Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) Board voted Wednesday to increase fares and tolls on its trains, subways, buses and bridges by approximately four percent, forcing workers to pay more for inadequate service. The tolls will go into effect March 31 and the fare hikes on April 21.

The 30-day unlimited pass for bus and subway rides will increase by 5 percent (from \$121 to \$127), while 7-day passes will go up 3.1 percent (from \$32 to \$33). Significantly, the 5 percent bonus on the pay-per-ride card, on which many poor workers rely, is also being eliminated, although the base fare of \$2.75 for a single ride will remain for now.

The tolls on most crossings on the tunnels and bridges controlled by the MTA will rise by 36 cents, hitting those who rely on cars rather than public transportation.

The MTA board also approved a maximum increase for Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) commuters of \$5.75 for weekly tickets and \$15 for monthly ones, amounting to a 4 percent hike. It will take effect for the tickets in May.

The fare hikes for the LIRR were passed just after a horrific accident involving an automobile and two trains killed three, revealing, once again, the crisis of the mass transit system under MTA control.

These increases—which New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, called part of a “regularly scheduled fare hike”—are expected to roll over into even further hikes.

The MTA is a New York state agency and would not have passed these increases without the go-ahead from the governor, who appoints a plurality of its board. Cuomo’s control of the agency was demonstrated in January when he issued a statement asserting that he “believes there should be no fare increases. Period.”

This forced the authority to postpone its planned fare and toll hike vote for about a month.

Cuomo played this gambit because he faces low poll approval ratings. Riders and his political opponents have blamed him for past fare and toll increases and deteriorating service. The unreliability of the transit system has forced many customers to abandon the bus and subways for various types of car service, which in turn has been one of the contributors to the agency’s growing budget deficit.

After the vote was postponed, the governor then made a 180-degree turn and threatened a 30 percent fare hike unless the state legislature passed congestion pricing to help fund the MTA. Under this proposal, automobile drivers would be digitally charged for coming into Manhattan south of 61st Street.

This proposal got a significant boost on Tuesday when New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, a “progressive” Democrat, stated his wholehearted support for this regressive tax after opposing it for years.

De Blasio issued a statement that declared: “This crisis runs deeper than ever before, and it’s now clear there is no way to address it without congestion pricing and other dedicated revenue streams. The time to act is now.” The tax, if passed by the state legislature, will produce an estimated \$1 billion a year.

Cuomo and de Blasio also expressed their support for a tax on legalized marijuana and an internet sales tax.

In his support for these taxes, the mayor has once again revealed the fraudulent character of his progressive pretensions. The congestion pricing reversal comes after de Blasio supported a \$3 billion tax give-away to convince Amazon, headed by Jeff Bezos, the richest man on the planet, to build part of its second headquarters in Queens.

The mayor and the governor also released a 10-point reorganization plan to transform the MTA by pushing through "... cost containment actions and improved management." In other words, to "fix" the MTA by raising fares and taxes on working class New Yorkers and attacking MTA employees.

The agency is confronting a \$1 billion deficit in its operating budget by 2022 and owes more than \$40 billion in its long-term bond debt. In addition, there are plans for necessary track, signal and station improvements that will cost an estimated \$40 to \$60 billion over the next decade.

Most of this money is needed to upgrade the antiquated subway signal system. However, the inadequate and dangerous nature of the stations themselves was brought into the public eye in January when a 22-year-old mother died after she fell down the stairs in a subway station with her 1-year-old daughter.

The station had no elevator, which makes it difficult to navigate for a significant number of its users, who include an estimated 200,000 children under five, 200,000 with mobility impairments and 340,000 seniors. Only 118, or one-fourth, of the subway stations in New York have elevator accessibility.

It is expected that the authority will be able to raise an additional \$336 million annually from the latest round of fare and toll hikes, which the acting MTA Chairman Fernando Ferrer admitted is woefully inadequate to meet the needs for mass transit in the region. He said that the MTA's financial issues are the "most daunting challenges [the MTA has] faced in decades."

Ferrer also said, "We know that the increases alone won't solve our problem, and just as urgent, we must fundamentally reform the MTA."

This means that further inroads on the right to reliable, safe and low-cost public transportation are on the agenda; they will not be limited to future fare hikes. Various forms of service cuts and budget cuts, which could reduce the number of employees working for the agency, are all being considered.

This was revealed in a letter sent by MTA management to all agency employees dated February 22 which states, "There is a story in the press today that indicates the MTA is discussing the potential of a significant reduction in force unless we are able to find voluntary savings at each agency. This is nothing new,

as agency leadership has warned of this possibility in numerous public statements and testimony over the previous weeks, if we are not able to achieve cost savings and secure additional revenue ...the MTA is in dire financial straits. We have substantial recurring deficits that are growing, not shrinking, and we must act."

The contract for about 40,000 New York City bus and subway workers will expire in May. The Transport Workers Union Local 100, which nominally represents them, has uncritically supported Cuomo for years, especially in his frequent feuds with de Blasio. The result has been one concession contract after another, including wage hikes below the rate of inflation.

Without question, the MTA's growing financial crisis will be the pretext for the deepening of its attacks on its employees as well as its passengers. The coming together of the mayor and the governor in recent months show that their past disputes are entirely superficial compared to their agreement on the necessity to impose the interests of Wall Street and the billionaires against the working class.

This points to the necessity of creating rank-and-file committees among transit workers and in working-class neighborhoods that will unite the working population, independently of the unions and the big-business politicians, in a struggle against the capitalist system.



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