As transit worker deaths continue rising, MTA promises families $500,000 in blood money

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On April 14, New York City's Metropolitan Transport Authority (MTA) Chairman Pat Foye announced that the families of workers dying from the coronavirus pandemic would each receive $500,000 in death benefits. Two days later the MTA requested an additional $3.9 billion in federal aid, on top of an initial bailout of $4 billion, as the pandemic has slashed ridership by 90 percent and intensified the agency's preexisting debt crisis.

Transit workers continue to pay the price for the authority's criminal response to the crisis. On Tuesday, the MTA's official death toll stood at 59. At least 2,269 transit workers have tested positive for the virus.

These developments came as the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site* hosted an online meeting on Wednesday night entitled, "Transit workers and the pandemic: A program of action for the working class." The meeting was attended by transit workers in New York, as well as other essential workers from across the country, many of whom voiced their solidarity with the transit workers and expressed the need for workers to unite their struggles. One transit worker told attendees that he and fellow workers believed the true number of deaths had already exceeded 80.

The call was also joined by a transit worker from Berlin, who expressed solidarity with transit workers in the US and across the globe. He went on to detail how he and his colleagues faced the same conditions and had also been abandoned by their union.

From April 17, following New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's order, MTA riders will be required to cover their faces with surgical masks, scarves or bandanas. This measure is a fig leaf to distract workers from the need for the radical reorganization of society in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including shutting down the subway systems, allocating unused vehicles to essential workers, housing essential workers so that they do not need mass transit to get to their jobs and ensuring full pay to all workers affected by the crisis.

This announcement came as the first scientific studies analyzing the role of mass transit in the spread of COVID-19 were released. Jeffrey Harris, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, stated in a study released on April 13 that "New York City's multitentacled subway system was a major disseminator—if not the principal transmission vehicle—of coronavirus infection during the initial takeoff of the massive epidemic that became evident throughout the city during March 2020." The decision to keep the subways open as well as riders and workers unprotected seems to have been one of the major driving factors behind the rapid spread of the disease in the city. On Thursday, the death toll in New York City stood at 11,477.

The $500,000 benefit was agreed to between MTA Chairman Foye and Transport Workers Union (TWU) Locals 100, 106, 2001 and 2055. Reluctant to call the sum a line-of-duty benefit, Foye described it as "a family benefit program given the tragic loss of life in a horrific pandemic." This reluctance exposes the true purpose of the program: to deter families of the deceased from pursing litigation over the criminally negligent response of both the MTA and TWU to this crisis, for which their loved ones have paid the ultimate price.

The promise of this blood money is a cynical ploy undertaken by the MTA with full support from the TWU to pacify its outraged workforce. Significantly, it has yet to be approved by the MTA's board and will cease to be available when COVID-19 is no longer a major issue. Given the ambiguity of the announcement and the MTA's record of continuously breaking its promises to workers (especially in the past six weeks) it remains to be seen if families ever get this money.

Before the announced delivery of N95 masks on April 4, and inspite of the MTA's own 2012 pandemic plan that ordered the stockpiling of such masks, workers were forced to go without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE)

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for weeks. For days following the announcement, many workers complained on social media that they had yet to receive the masks.

Despite continuous reassurances that cars and crew rooms were being disinfected daily since the beginning of March, one worker, Eddie Muniz, revealed on Twitter on April 16 that the crew room at the 179th Street station was last cleaned on March 29. He added, “Eighteen days is unacceptable by your employees’ standards, how about yours?” Another worker, Helena, commented on Facebook that face shields promised by interim MTA President Sarah Feinburg on April 15 were not at her station.

At the SEP-WSWS online meeting, Wilson, a New York transit worker, described his own situation in the midst of the crisis. “I have been quarantined for two weeks,” he said. “In that time I haven’t even been paid! I spoke to my union secretary, and he claimed the payroll guy was also out. So, today was pay day, and I didn’t get my paycheck. Many of us live paycheck-to-paycheck; we should get paid when we are out of work. I am due to return against my doctor’s wishes. I have COPD, and my doctor says my chances will be slim to none if I contract the coronavirus.”

The MTA’s failure to pay its workers, which is widespread, runs contrary to the New York state COVID-19 sick leave law, applicable to transit employees from April 1, which ensures 14 days of fully paid leave for workers forced into quarantine.

In yet another PR stunt, on Wednesday the MTA announced a partnership with Northwell Health, New York State’s largest healthcare provider, to deliver “rapid” COVID-19 testing to workers. The agreement will allow priority testing for up to 50 MTA employees a day. At this rate it would take *four years* for the MTA’s 72,000 workers to be tested! The record of the MTA’s response is one of deceit and inaction. This has culminated in dozens of preventable deaths whose number will only increase in the coming weeks.

Wayne, another transit worker who attended the online meeting, stated, “There’s no respect for employees. They are letting us interact with the public and causing us to get infected with the virus. As of today, 81 active members have passed on from the virus. They raised the death benefit, but what about those of us that are living? We are going out every day and getting the virus. I know my colleagues are working together to help each other feeding their families and children. All workers on the frontlines are in this together.”

Another worker, Jamal, said that track workers were laboring in close proximity, while forced to shout at each other to make themselves heard, creating ideal conditions for spreading the virus. He added, “The subway should have been shut down for two or three weeks at the beginning of this crisis. Period. We could have had a fleet of taxis driving essential workers around. This disease is spreading around by mass transit. You can get on the train in Coney Island, and two hours later you are spreading the disease in the Bronx. I don’t have a college degree, and even I can see that. Why can’t the president?”

The answer to that question lies in the stark contrast between the MTA’s malign neglect of its workforce and its solicitous treatment of its bondholders. On March 31, Pat Foye appeared on the Brian Lehrer Show to reassure investors, “We expect to make every principal and interest payment—we’re not asking for forgiveness from our creditors.” Trying to help the transit authority’s billionaire and multimillionaire creditors cash in on the White House’s corporate bailout, Foye continued, “To be able to do that, we’re going to need additional support from the federal government.”

While refusing to ask his creditors for forgiveness, Foye is quite willing to demand workers sacrifice their lives.

If the aid requested by Foye is granted, the money will not go toward the acquisition of test kits, PPE or to pay for workers on leave, but straight into the pockets of the bondholders on Wall Street. To achieve the same purpose of meeting payments to its creditors, the MTA will inevitably use the crisis as an excuse to cut costs by laying off workers it deems unnecessary. Jey, a station agent who attended Wednesday’s online meeting, reported, “They’re taking all the cash out of the booths. It may be the beginning of a shift in the system for the station agent job. This job is my only protection right now.”

The MTA’s response is only a continuation of its pre-pandemic policy of squeezing transit workers to their limits while siphoning off ever increasing sums to the bondholders. Last year, the MTA spent $2.9 billion on bond repayments (16 percent of its total expenditures). This policy has been supported by the bought-and-paid-for TWU every step of the way.

Their criminal response to the COVID-19 pandemic is the direct product of the subordination of New York’s transit system—and the very lives of transit workers—to the profit interests of finance capital.

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