

Washington D.C. transit system announces budget cuts and layoffs due to ridership drop off amid pandemic

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The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) faces a \$212 million shortfall in Fiscal Year 2021, about 10 percent of its projected budget, largely due to a 90 percent plunge in rail ridership, more than 50 percent drop in bus rides, and the end of federal emergency aid.

The Federal CARES Act, passed at the end of March, provided \$767 million to WMATA, also known as Metro, and allowed it to temporarily stave off layoffs, but those funds will run out by the end of 2020. With the massive ridership decline and increased costs associated with the pandemic, Metro reports using about \$100 million a month of the federal funds. WMATA officials project that without additional federal funds, current services will be reduced after January 2021; the fiscal year runs until June 30, 2021.

According to the American Public Transit Association, \$32 billion is needed nationwide to keep transit systems across the country running. While Congress was eager to make trillions available to the banks and major corporations as part of the CARES Act, it has failed to pass any new legislation that would assist social infrastructure. In addition to not extending the expired federal unemployment relief contained in the CARES Act, it has done nothing to assist cash strapped transit systems nationwide, which face massive fiscal deficits.

After closing 19 rail stations in March as part of the Washington D.C. regional shut-down in the face of the pandemic, WMATA began to resume near normal operations within the last few weeks. In mid-August, Metro restored normal opening hours on the rail line, extended the hours of operation from 9 p.m. until 11 p.m., and began reopening stations. On August 23, the

transit system restored bus service to about three-quarters of pre-pandemic levels. On September 8, the last two closed rail stations were reopened.

Despite the broader reopening, ridership continues to be low. WMATA reports that on Monday of this week, for example, rail ridership was down 88 percent from a year ago and bus trips were down 61 percent. With the transit agency facing a new fiscal cliff, service is set to be cut once again. The budget cuts, likely to begin by February 2021, will lead to longer wait times between trains and buses and the closing of the rail system at 9 p.m.

Bus fares, which had been eliminated to protect drivers, are also set to resume in January. Metro says instead of having riders enter the rear of the bus, as they currently do for driver safety, they will install shields to protect operators, as the fare machines are next to drivers.

To further address the fiscal shortfall, Metro plans to reduce the workforce by 1,700, a 13 percent cut. WMATA General Manager Paul Wiedefeld says Metro will first look at leaving unfilled positions open and asking for early retirements. In addition, Wiedefeld's plan to address the budget shortfall includes attacks on non-union employees, with five-day furloughs and no pay increases for the next year. Paratransit drivers, who provide van rides for disabled riders from their home, would also face job losses under Wiedefeld's proposal.

With the cutbacks, it will again be near-impossible to maintain safe social distancing on buses and trains. A Metro rider told the local Fox affiliate last week, "If they cut back, it's going to be a long commute with crowded trains. ... It's going to affect us a lot, getting

back and [f]orth to work, people that don't drive ... When they did [cutbacks] the first time with trains every twenty minutes and people were on the train, it was crowded and you can't really sit six feet apart if the train is crowded."

The cutbacks and resulting overcrowding will further exacerbate the drop in ridership, as those with any option to avoid public transit will likely do so until the public health situation dramatically improves. "Generally, the rider sentiment in some of the surveys that we've done shows there's a fear to use the system [until a vaccine is distributed]," Wiedefeld said last week.

Last month, WMATA reported the first fatality of one of its employees from COVID-19. Joseph Reid worked as a manager in the system's Rail Operations Control Center, which directs all train traffic on the system. Hundreds of transit workers have died from COVID-19 nationwide. As of September 8, WMATA reports that 327 employees have tested positive for the disease.

The *WSWS Transit Workers Newsletter* recently spoke with a driver for WMATA. The worker, who wished to remain anonymous, said, "Social distancing is out the window" at WMATA. Asked about the death of Reid, the worker said, "I think there's been more [dead] than him. There was a guy I knew back in March that died. WMATA first started introducing the 6-foot social distancing rule after he caught COVID-19."

The driver also noted that WMATA was failing to take the most basic measures to keep employees safe, "We went several months without any sanitizers or personal protective equipment. Even now, when I go to work, there's no soap in the restroom. It's ridiculous, we have to provide our own soap!"

The Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689, which represents thousands of WMATA employees, including bus and rail operators, offers no way forward for Metro workers. Faced with the prospect of a mass layoff of its membership, the ATU has taken a position on the budget crisis that is identical to WMATA management.

In a letter addressed to Congressional leaders, the ATU begged: "Everyone has made incredible sacrifices during this pandemic. But we believe that laying off some of the very same essential workers that have kept this country moving while millions of people worked

from the comfort of their homes, is unconscionable." In a separate September 10 press release Local 689 blamed "Political gridlock" for the crisis in transit funding.

Rather than appealing to the population to oppose attempts to push the budget crisis onto the backs of working people, the ATU is left begging hat in hand to the same political forces that bailed out the banking system with the CARES Act in March and continue to enforce its will. Phone calls and emails sent from the *WSWS Transit Workers News Letter* to Local 689 to inquire if it would defend its dues paying members went unanswered.

Instead, the ATU is pushing its members behind the Biden presidential campaign, which will do nothing to address the needs of the working class, including funding to protect transit jobs, and ensuring the systems can operate safely as the pandemic continues.



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