

New York region transportation agency prepares draconian cuts to service and transit jobs

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New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) announced plans at a virtual public meeting held Wednesday to make unprecedented cuts to bus and subway service, as well as in the surrounding commuter railroads. The cuts, if carried through, will decimate public transit in the nation's largest metropolis.

According to the 2021 budget plan, which MTA board members will vote on next month, service cuts will eliminate 9,367 transit worker jobs, mostly in the city of New York. The board also stated its plan to impose a wage freeze on its entire workforce, which, when considering the rate of inflation, amounts to a wage cut.

The brutality of the current attack on transit workers was unmistakable Wednesday, despite the handwringing and crocodile tears from Governor Cuomo's junior executives at the MTA. The massive job and wage cuts were announced shortly after the New York City Transit chief announced the death of two more workers, at least one from COVID-19. According to a tally by rank-and-file transit workers, the coronavirus death toll for active New York City transit workers is now approaching 150.

The pandemic has led to a sustained drop in fare collection, cutting off one of the MTA's primary revenue streams. Subway ridership in November is down nearly 70 percent compared to last year, while bus passengers are down by half.

Agency and government officials have pinned any hopes of avoiding the budget apocalypse on the prospects of another federal bailout. The MTA has a shortfall of nearly \$2.5 billion for the rest of this year and more than \$6 billion for 2020. The requested \$12 billion supplemental bailout to balance the books

through 2022 remains nowhere in sight, and there is little chance it will pass the lame-duck Congress before the budget approval in December.

The response by the Democratic Party functionaries that compose the MTA board makes clear they intend to put the full burden of the budget crisis on the MTA workforce and the riding public. Under the plan, entire subway, bus, and commuter rail routes will disappear, and service on remaining routes reduced in frequency.

The cuts to the bus system are the most severe. The MTA plans to ax 5,869 jobs concurrent with a 40 percent reduction in bus service. These cuts will devastate not only bus workers and their families but also the disproportionately poor and elderly riders who rely on bus service.

These planned cuts could have a disastrous impact on the region's livelihood. An analysis by the NYU Rudin Center for Transportation projected a reduction of \$65 billion in gross domestic product leading to a loss of 450,000 jobs by 2022. "Simply put, without reliable and safe subway, bus and commuter rail services, the future of the city and region is in doubt. Students will not be able to get to school, essential workers to their jobs, and offices will remain empty," Mitchell L. Moss, director of the Rudin Center, said last month.

While the transit agency in New York is the largest, agencies are preparing similar cuts throughout the country. The Metro in Washington D.C. is planning on buyouts to eliminate 1,400 jobs. The Regional Transportation District of Denver, Colorado, voted to cut 700 jobs and reduce worker pay. In Philadelphia, the head of the SEPTA transit agency has made it clear that service cuts, layoffs and fare hikes are on the agenda without federal relief.

In New York, the MTA also announced plans for a 4 percent fare hike and an 8 percent increase for bridge and tunnel tolls. These hikes are typical of the fare and toll changes the agency has been imposing on its riders and vehicle drivers since 2010. However, with millions of New Yorkers facing financial ruin and the city abandoning its modest reduced-fare program for low-income families, access to transit is already becoming beyond reach for many.

The wage freezes, layoffs, service reductions and fare hikes, as drastic as they are, will not come close to shoring up the MTA's finances. Even after a projected \$1.2 billion in savings from these cuts in 2021, the MTA projects it will still be short up to \$3.2 billion for the year.

To balance the books, the MTA will proceed with the borrowing of \$2.9 billion from the Federal Reserve bank under its Municipal Liquidity Facility (MLF) program. The agency already tapped the MLF for \$450 million to cover debt payments that came due in August. To repay these loans, the MTA intends to issue bonds in 2023, adding to its runaway \$46 billion bond debt.

According to the state comptroller Thomas DiNapoli, the MTA is already suffering "suffocating levels" of debt. He has projected that paying interest and principal is forecast to take up 25.7 percent of the MTA's revenue in 2021. Between 2020 and 2024, the MTA has budgeted \$16 billion in debt repayment, equivalent to the entire projected deficit over the same period.

The repayment to wealthy firms like BlackRock, the largest MTA debt holder and run by the billionaire Larry Fink, is considered untouchable. Meanwhile, thousands of MTA workers, who have already seen more than 140 colleagues sacrificed to keep the economy open during the pandemic, are considered expendable.

The national president of the Transport Workers Union, John Samuelson, who serves Governor Cuomo as a member of the MTA board, responded with a proposal to increase borrowing further. Samuelson's proposal, offered as a reprieve from immediate job cuts and wage freezes, would only further consolidate control over the MTA in the hands of large bondholders.

Samuelson's plan follows the TWU's collaboration with the MTA in forcing transit workers to remain on

the job without protective gear throughout the first peak of the pandemic. This summer, Samuelson joined with the MTA chairman, Pat Foye, to co-write an op-ed in the *New York Times* fruitlessly begging Congress for a rescue package and covering up for the Democratic Party, which serves the interests of the billionaires as much as the Republicans.

At the meeting on Wednesday, there was no discussion of the more than 600 billionaires in the United States who now have a combined wealth of around \$4 trillion. Their fortunes have increased during the pandemic while working people have lost their jobs, incomes and lives.

To adequately fund vital social services like public transportation and ensure good quality jobs, it is not a question of whether the resources exist. It is a question of which class in society controls them. We urge transit workers to develop rank-and-file committees independent of the pro-corporate unions to carry forward a fight against layoffs and cuts and for the independent interests of the working class.



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