

Deep budget cuts face mass transit systems throughout the United States

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Public transit systems have announced plans for massive budget cuts and layoffs as federal emergency aid has run out in localities across the United States. Transit administrators and experts have called for continued infusions of cash to help stave off significant cuts as mass ridership has not picked up from its precipitous fall off in the spring.

In Washington, DC, representatives of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), popularly known as Metro, announced plans to eliminate 1,400 of the system's nearly 12,000 workers through layoffs and early retirements. The transit system has reported losses of nearly \$100 million per-month throughout the course of the pandemic, exhausting the \$767 million in funds it received under the CARES Act stimulus.

Despite the near-total reopening of the system to the public in August, fare revenue is 78 percent lower than pre-pandemic levels. "Metro officials say they have run out of options to avoid making difficult decisions as they grapple with the crisis brought on by the pandemic," states a *Washington Post* report. The system has reported a \$176 million shortfall.

In a bid for increased revenue, the transit system has announced plans to return to the collection of bus fares in January. During spring, the WMATA had suspended the collection of bus fares and only allowed rear door boarding on the buses. Now, bus operators will be given a plastic shield in return for a resumption of front door boarding.

Last weekend, WMATA reported that a second transit worker, a storage room clerk, had died from COVID-19. According to WMATA, 435 workers have tested positive for COVID-19.

The decision to cut WMATA funding follows the decision of transit systems throughout the United States

to announce plans to lay off workers and cut services. Last week, New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) announced 9,367 layoffs, along with a universal wage freeze for all employees. Additionally, 40 percent of bus services could be axed in the country's largest public transit system. The MTA has reported a projected \$6 billion budget deficit for 2020.

In Philadelphia, representatives of the South Eastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA) announced that "every option will be considered" as the system projects a \$350 million budget deficit.

Earlier this month, SEPTA announced that it would be suspending overnight rail service for its Market-Frankford and Broad Street lines. SEPTA officials have largely remained quiet about other cuts to services. SEPTA general manager Leslie Richards stated last week to the Philadelphia *Inquirer* that the system was considering reductions "both on the cuts side, as well as on how we need to make changes. We simply cannot afford to approach it in any other way."

A September report by the New York-based TransitCenter projected that a 40 percent service cut on SEPTA would result in 400,000 people losing access to transit in the Philadelphia region. The *Inquirer* quotes TransitCenter spokesperson Ben Fried, who declares: "Once cuts are made, it is not a matter of just snapping back to normal as soon as you put your budget back together again," i.e. the cuts will become permanent.

Earlier this month, Boston's Massachusetts Bay Transportation Agency (MBTA) announced it would be cutting weekend commuter rail trips, 25 different bus routes as well as ferry and overnight subway services. In October, the MBTA reported 330,000 daily trips on average in its system. This is down from over 1.26 million daily before the pandemic.

In October, the San Francisco-based Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system announced forced retirements for employees along with other cuts. The system has a \$33 million deficit projected for the fourth quarter of its fiscal year ending June 2021. The 2021 fiscal year budget is also predicted to have a deficit of \$177 million. As of last month, BART ridership was at 13 percent of pre-pandemic levels.

Arkansas's Rock Region Metro system announced this month that, due to "the coronavirus pandemic's impact on local government budgets," it would refrain from asking local governments for pre-pandemic levels of funding. According to *Arkansas Online*, the transit system was able to tap \$2.2 million in CARES Act funding for this year, "money that won't be available in future years."

As a part of the March CARES Act package, congressional leaders gave \$25 billion to transit systems in the US. The American Public Transportation Association (APTA) has asked Congress for another infusion of funds for regional transit systems as the pandemic continues to ravage the US population, reporting over 200,000 daily cases for the first time last week.

According to APTA, without such funding, nearly 6 in 10 transit systems will face cutbacks in the near future. "If you look at the worst outcomes, I think for some, it could mean dramatic reductions in service," stated APTA CEO and president Paul Skoutelas in a September report. "For some, it may even mean, unless there is additional forthcoming resources, they may even have to shut down."

The budget cuts are being prepared despite significant numbers of low paid essential and other workers being forced to rely on public transportation. *Science Daily* interviewed researchers from Ohio State University who found that "in cities in the Midwest and the deep South, most public transit users have jobs where they still had to come in to work during the pandemic and didn't have any other choice."

"These are the health care workers, people working service jobs, working in grocery stores, people who clean and maintain buildings," stated researcher Harvey Miller, director of Ohio State's Center for Urban and Regional Analysis.

Under conditions where essential workers have been forced to bear the brunt of the pandemic, Democratic

and Republican Party-controlled jurisdictions are demanding that workers, whom they manipulatively refer to as "heroes," now must suffer the consequences of budget deficits.

Rather than mobilize workers in defense of their livelihoods, various trade union officials have begged for additional funds from the presumptive administration of the president-elect, Democrat Joe Biden. This, despite Biden's pledges to serve the interests of Wall Street as well as his history of enforcing austerity as part of the Obama administration during the last major financial crisis in 2008-2009.



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