

Massive service cuts to public transit planned in Massachusetts

Will McCalliss
3 December 2020

In early November, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) announced their plans to cut services in response to the budget deficit caused by low ridership during the coronavirus pandemic. The impacted services include local and commuter train, bus and ferry transportation, with the planned changes to be implemented in different modes of transportation at varying times in 2021. The plan will be voted on by the Fiscal and Management Control Board (FMCB) December 7.

In justifying this plan, the MBTA cited a 74 percent decrease in average daily ridership, down from 1.3 million to only 330,000. This, along with more people potentially continuing to work from home even after the pandemic, could lead to an almost \$600 million deficit. The proposed service cuts would save \$142 million by summer 2022.

The extent of the proposed cuts is drastic and too lengthy to enumerate fully. Among the more notable changes are:

- Subway service would end at midnight as opposed to 1 a.m., and at peak times, subway arrivals would decrease in frequency by as much as 2 minutes; on average, the frequency would be cut down by 20 percent.

- Buses would also stop at midnight, reduce frequency on “essential” routes by 5 percent and 20 percent on “non-essential” routes, consolidate and/or restructure 10 lines and cut 25 low-traffic routes.

- Commuter rail service would only run until 9:00 p.m., cutting 544 trains a day down to 430. Weekend service would be cut entirely and up to six low-usage

stations could be closed.

- Ferry service would be shuttered entirely.

The impact this would have on workers is massive. Workers who rely on lines and stations being cut would have to add time to their commute to make multiple transfers and walk or drive to and from stations that are further away from their homes and jobs. Rush-hour subway and bus riders, who are often already forced to wait for multiple crowded vehicles to pass before getting on a vehicle with space, would have to wait even longer as the crowding becomes even more drastic.

Night-shift workers could be stranded after their shifts or forced to go home early and lose the extra hours’ wages. Many workers would have to resort to ride share services such as Uber, driving their transportation costs up sharply.

In the most severe cases, workers would simply be unable to commute to their jobs when they are needed and be fired. And the many people who rely on public transit for access to necessities such as groceries, childcare and health care, would all find themselves in dire straits. Those who rely on transit to be able to participate in general commerce and culture would also be cut off from fully participating in society.

These potentially disastrous cuts are justified, as always, by the lie that there is “no money” to pay for these services in one of the richest cities in America. In reality, there are more than enough resources to go around, but they are being monopolized by a tiny layer of capitalists.

Abigail Johnson, CEO of Fidelity Investments and richest person in Massachusetts, has a net worth of \$15 billion. The MBTA’s deficit is 4 percent of her net

worth. It is not even 1 percent of the combined net worth of the dozen richest people in the state.

Not only do these billionaires in the highest seats of power in the financial industry stockpile their wealth, but they directly profit off of the debts of the MBTA. According to an MBTA advisory board report, paying off the MBTA's debt will cost \$523.5 million, over a fifth of the MBTA's operating costs, in just the 2021 fiscal year; \$303.4 million of this vast sum is solely to pay off interest.

The city's main transit union, the Boston Carmen's Union (BCU), has organized only a handful of virtual and in-person rallies, the latter of which was only attended by a couple dozen people, despite the millions affected by the cuts. The BCU has spent most of its focus on promoting the election of Joe Biden and other various Democrats, officially endorsing them on their public website multiple times.

For their part, the MBTA is no less aligned with the foul politics of the Democratic Party. At recent virtual public meetings, purportedly held to hear and take commuters' feedback "into consideration," elected Democratic officials were first given the floor to speak. Many state Senate members bemoaned the damage the service cuts would cause to their constituents, and Congressman Stephen Lynch, after patting himself on the back for the money the MBTA received from the CARES Act 8 months ago, blamed the current lack of funds on Republicans in the US Senate for not passing the HEROES Act.

Of course, all of these Democrats knew full well the Republican Party would never pass the HEROES Act, a dead-on-arrival bill which amounted to nothing more than political theater, and none of them called for the types of mass action that would be needed to divert funds away from the wealthy and into public infrastructure.

When asked at the meetings how many MBTA workers would lose their jobs, MBTA General Manager Steve Poftak would not give a straightforward answer. Though he was certain to stress this would be done with "great reluctance," he made it clear that job losses were on the table.

Additionally, in their definition of "essential" service, the MBTA goes out of its way to identify "communities of color" as being in critical need of transit, attempting to shift the focus away from class

and towards race.

The ruling class never lets a good crisis go to waste and the pandemic is no exception. The banks' chokehold on the dilapidated MBTA has left no money to spend on improving essential public transit infrastructure, and these cuts only accelerate the process. Cutting costs means more money can be put in the coffers of the financial elite.

The fight for public transit cannot be separated from the fight for working class power. MBTA workers and riders, united with health care professionals, must form a rank-and-file safety committee, totally independent from the trade unions and Democratic Party, to ensure the maintenance and improvement of public transit service as well as safe working and traveling conditions amid a pandemic. The funds for these initiatives will be found in the major banks, which must be expropriated and converted into public utilities.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact