

Washington D.C. transit system proposes unprecedented cuts in response to severe budget shortfall

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On Monday, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) proposed to lay off almost a third of its workforce, cut half of all bus routes and close 19 of its 91 rail stations. WMATA's proposal, which calls for layoffs of 3,800 of Metro's 12,000-member workforce, is aimed at overcoming a projected \$494.5 million shortfall in fiscal year 2022.

As with transit systems throughout the country, WMATA, also known as Metro, has been hit by a massive loss in ridership from the pandemic. Last week, ridership on the rail system was down about 80 percent compared with before the pandemic, while bus ridership ranged from between 16 to 55 percent below pre-pandemic levels. As a result of declining revenues, the proposed fiscal year 2022 operating budget, which runs from July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2022, represents about a 25 percent cut from WMATA's \$2 billion budget for 2020.

Metro has also called for the elimination of weekend rail service, ending rail service at 9 p.m. on weekdays, two hours earlier than it does currently, and extending weekday wait times for trains to 30 minutes in most cases. Before the pandemic, trains typically ran every three to five minutes during normal commuting hours.

WMATA's general manager, Paul Wiedefeld, cautioned that the budget proposal is not Metro's "worst-case scenario." To meet even the projections of a \$500 million shortfall, the transit system is counting on ridership to increase by about 20 percent from current levels, largely based on forecasts for more ridership from the tourism industry.

Before the pandemic, Metro projected receiving almost \$800 million in revenue from fares and parking during the current fiscal year. Even with projections of

a 20 percent increase in ridership from current levels, WMATA only expects to make \$264 million in ridership revenue in fiscal year 2022.

In addition, Metro is counting on normal contributions from the area's local and state governments. Maryland, Virginia, and Washington D.C. are projected to provide \$1.145 billion toward Metro's budget, which is based on a 3 percent increase of the three jurisdictions' 2021 fiscal year contributions.

With states facing declining tax revenues due to the pandemic and increased expenses for public health measures, it is far from certain that such money will be forthcoming. "That is a big ask for them," Wiedefeld said. "They are under tremendous pressure. And obviously if we don't get that, then we would have to make other adjustments to the budget."

The proposed cuts will have a devastating impact on the working class in the region. In Washington D.C., for example, 36 percent of residents do not have cars and rely on Metro to commute for work. Matty Shafran, who works as a tutor in the Maryland suburbs, told the *Washington Post*: "I work multiple jobs to support myself, but cuts to Metrorail and Metrobus mean no work. If Metrorail were to cut weekend services and Maryland bus routes as they are proposing, I would be unable to find alternative routes to my weekday and weekend jobs without spending \$60 to \$100 a week on Uber, for which I do not have the budget."

Metro employees are also targeted. The agency says it will cut 1,400 jobs during the current fiscal year and projects an additional 2,400 cuts next year. As part of that process, Metro announced two weeks ago that it would offer \$15,000 buyouts to about 2,000 retirement-

eligible employees. After the buyouts are completed, further layoffs will be announced.

To save another \$20 million, Wiedefeld announced that he will seek to withhold wage increases promised in collective bargaining agreements for unionized workers and postpone raises for nonunion employees.

WMATA has largely forestalled layoffs and service cuts to date because of \$767 million provided to the transit agency via the federal government's CARES Act, passed at the end of March. In September, Metro reported using approximately \$100 million a month of the federal funds to overcome revenue shortfalls from the fall in ridership. However, with no additional federal relief forthcoming, WMATA is now turning to mass layoffs and unprecedented service cuts to balance its budget.

The crisis in public transportation is nationwide. On November 19, the American Public Transit Association (APTA) repeated a call it initially made in August, calling for at least an additional \$32 billion in federal funding for transit systems. In its November announcement, APTA warned that without emergency federal funding, 60 percent of public transit systems will have to reduce service and furlough employees, "leaving our communities without service and jobs during an unparalleled pandemic."

The cuts to public transportation will also have knock-on effects in the rest of the economy. According to APTA, "more than eight in 10 businesses have seen a reduction in their transit industry business as a result of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and nearly one-third of transit industry businesses are concerned that they may go out of business if additional federal funding is not provided."

While the Democrats and Republicans have been ready and willing to make seemingly unlimited sums available to the banks and major corporations, the APTA's call for federal funding for public transportation has gone nowhere in Congress. This is part and parcel of the government's entire response to the pandemic, which has been to provide trillions for the rich and miserly sums to the working class.

Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689, which represents about 7,800 of the 12,000 Metro employees, offers no way forward against this latest attack on the living standards of transit workers and, more broadly, on the transportation needs of the population.

In a statement issued in response to Metro's announced buyout plan two weeks ago, Local 689 President Raymond Jackson placed all hopes in a Biden administration to provide funding, stating, "It is clear that [WMATA] is rushing to cut service and lay off employees, especially when there is a great possibility for additional funding under the incoming Biden-Harris administration." Since the November 30 announcement of further attacks on Metro workers, Jackson has been silent, and the union has issued no statement on either its Facebook page or website.

In opposition to the unions, which will take no meaningful action to defend working class living standards, transit workers must form rank-and-file committees in their workplaces. Contrary to the unions' latching onto the tails of the Wall Street-dominated Democratic Party, transit workers must reach out to broader sections of the working class, including transit workers around the country and the world.

The *WSWS Transit Workers News Letter* calls on transit workers around the world to follow the example of London transit workers who have already set up a rank-and-file committee. Only in this way can workers carry out the necessary political fight, based on a socialist program, to secure the allocation of all resources necessary to ensure high quality public transportation, including resisting all layoffs and wage cuts, and ensuring that all necessary public health measures are put in place to protect the lives of transit workers as the coronavirus pandemic spreads out of control.



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