In a criminal disregard for human life, New York transit agency seeks increased ridership

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Amid another dangerous pandemic surge, New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) is determined to raise revenues by increasing ridership as much as possible on its network of buses, subways and trains.

MTA chairman Janno Liber has called bringing back the passengers his "number one, number two, and number three priorities." In a radio interview, Lieber turned reality on its head, declaring, "we got a safe workforce, our customers are comfortable, and we know that… they're coming back at about 70% of pre-COVID."

Liber ignored the fact that at least 177 transit workers have died of COVID-19, a rate that exceeds the average for the working-age population in the city by 70 percent. Cases in the nation have increased about 20 percent just in the last two weeks, while the more infectious Omicron variant threatens an unprecedented spike. Workers and students are coming back to mass transit not because it is safe, but because they are compelled by school and workplace reopenings.

The MTA's utter indifference to the health impacts on its workforce, its riders, and the general population is consistent with the ruling class's policies throughout the country and internationally. The Biden Administration has adamantly insisted that the potentially catastrophic threat of Omicron will not disrupt the flow of profits for the corporations. Along with Democratic Party Governor Kathy Hochul and the city's Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio, Biden has insisted that there will be no returns to lockdowns or remote schooling.

The focus on generating revenues by returning passengers to overcrowded trains and buses comes as the MTA grapples with a long-term funding crisis. Despite the input of billions of dollars from the federal government, the transit authority projects a $1.4 billion deficit in its 2025 operating budget. On top of that, it owes $49 billion as a result of insufficient governmental support for its capital improvement program.

The transit agency had received $4 billion from the CARES Act in March 2020, followed by an additional $10 billion combined from the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act and the American Rescue Plan. Another $10 billion is expected for the agency over the next several years due to the recently passed infrastructure law. This $24 billion goes towards both operating expenses and the capital improvement program.

However, even these sums are insufficient. The MTA's current five-year capital plan, which stalled with the onset of the pandemic, calls for $54.8 billion by 2024 to fund projects like elevator upgrades, modernizing the subway signal system to improve trip times, as well as building the extension of the Second Avenue subway line. The plan does not remedy decades of disinvestment, let alone expand much-needed service to transit deserts. In other sections of the city, housing density has exploded without any expansion of transit service, leaving subway lines dangerously overcrowded every day, even without a raging pandemic.

MTA Chief Financial Officer Robert Foran said at a recent board meeting, "We've been saying this since 2017. We have been structurally out of balance since then. We need additional recurring revenues coming in every year. The pandemic hit, and it just blew us out of the water."

In 2019, transit fares accounted for about 38 percent of the agency's $17 billion operating budget. In 2022, it is expected that due to the decline in ridership and increased costs, transit fares will cover about 27 percent of an $18.5 billion budget. Foran also noted that even when the pandemic is over, mass transit ridership is expected to top out at 86 percent of pre-pandemic levels.

The MTA calculates that alongside state and city efforts to fully reopen the economy, a six-month pause to its fare hike plan will encourage more bus and subway trips. Nevertheless, fare hikes are possible in 2022, which are projected to raise $90 million, and again in 2023 and 2025.

Even as MTA tries to increase ridership, passengers continue to experience delays, often accompanied by dangerous overcrowding, due to crew shortages. This is a result of the job-cutting consolidation plan that originated before the pandemic. Its goal was to eliminate 2,700 jobs and save as much as $530 million annually. However, instead of reducing management and administrative ones as was originally conceived, 84 percent of the reductions were in maintenance and operations.

When the pandemic hit, the agency saw a wave of workers retiring or quitting due to health concerns. The agency reduced its workforce from 72,800 employees in December 2018 to 66,260 employees in July 2021, a reduction in force of 6,540.

Nonetheless, according to a State Comptroller report, the MTA is determined to continue its attacks on the transit workforce, which consumes about 60 percent of its operating budget. Bob Foran has on more than one occasion demanded so-called “affordable labor settlements.” In other words, the transit workforce must pay for the agency’s fiscal crisis even though the workers had no role in creating it.

In point of fact, transit workers are currently paying dearly as a result of the current high rate of inflation. The current four-year contract negotiated by the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, with a membership that includes about 37,000 New York bus and subway workers, covering the period May 2019 to May 2023, provides wage increases of 2 percent, 2.25 percent, 2.5 percent, and 2.5 percent, significantly below the current rate of inflation of over 6 percent.

In addition, while the authority claims that it is safe for the passengers to ride and for workers to operate the system, station agents are still not allowed to handle cash and sell metro cards to customers. As is widely recognized, the unstated but real purpose is to eliminate that job category and replace them with the new, higher-tech OMNY (One Metro New York) card.

Meanwhile, the MTA refuses even to consider calling for the wealthy bondholders to make any sacrifice. Indeed, according to the Comptroller’s report, debt service is about 17 percent of the authority’s operating budget and growing. If the MTA fails to increase fare revenues, it faces the discipline of the bond markets, which will raise the cost for borrowing and plunge the authority into a deeper crisis.

The position of the MTA that the health and welfare of its workers and passengers must be completely subordinate to financial considerations is accepted by the TWU, which has fully supported the MTA’s reckless pursuit of increased ridership. The union has collaborated with state and local officials while 177 MTA workers, including four in the past two months, have lost their lives.

This situation can only change to the extent that workers begin to mobilize as a class and fight for their own interests. An examination of the experience of the past two years is critical to understand why so many workers have died, who is responsible and what must be done. We invite all transit workers to participate in the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic organized by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth international to investigate the disastrous response to the pandemic.