

Congress holds hearings with Washington D.C. transit leaders over failure to resolve ongoing mechanical failures

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On Thursday, representatives of the Washington Metro Area Transit Authority (WMATA) were questioned on Capitol Hill by the House Subcommittee on Oversight and Reform. The hearing, titled “Revitalizing WMATA: Getting to a Culture of Excellence,” came as the nation’s third largest transit system has been plagued by mechanical and financial crises.

WMATA, known popularly as “Metro,” has been unable to resolve a defect in the wheelbase of its most popular railcars, the 7000-series. A series of potentially “catastrophic” derailments last year caused a federally-appointed inspector to pull the defective cars out of service.

Last month local news outlet *DCist* reported that Metro would not return any of the 7000-series cars until mid-April. Metro general manager Paul J. Wiedefeld was quoted saying that “[w]e’re at the start of that 90-day pause, and we’ll work to find the root cause as quickly as we can and return to regular service as quickly as we can.”

The removal of nearly 60 percent of the transit system’s railcars has forced Metro “to cut train frequencies, in some cases relying on 40-year-old cars pulled from storage,” wrote the *Washington Post* last week. This has caused delays of sometimes up to a half-hour, while leaving commuters forced to travel to work in packed train cars amid a dangerous pandemic.

At the hearing, officials took turns expressing dismay at the month’s-long delays while also encouraging management staff to “get it together.”

“In 2019, prior to the pandemic, WMATA’s total ridership reached nearly 300 million trips per year with an average weekday Metrorail ridership of 626,000,”

stated the subcommittee’s website. This makes “WMATA... an essential component of transit for the functioning of the federal government.”

A number of officials expressed shock at the transit system’s array of safety problems. *DCist* noted “little new information was revealed” as “ongoing National Transportation Safety Board, Washington Metrorail Safety Commission, U.S. Department of Transportation, and other investigations limited what Metro officials would say on the record.”

Several noted Metro’s previous knowledge of the wheelbase issue since at least 2017. Metro inspector general Geoff Cherrington explained that while he didn’t think metro officials “intentionally withheld” safety information, they should have “run it up the chain of command.”

Maryland Democrat Jamie Raskin compared the defect to a gas leak, accusing Metro of just trying to “report it to the oven manufacturer... and I don’t tell anybody in the house” even though “the oven is a danger to life and limb.”

Significantly, general manager Weidefeld, who has announced he would retire this summer, called attention to a \$500 million funding shortfall which is expected to come due by 2024. “Simply put, the pre-pandemic financial model for Metro is no longer sustainable,” he said at the hearing.

On January 22, in a detailed report, the *Post* warned about the stagnating effects on ridership levels by these setbacks and its financial impact, noting that “transit officials say the biggest challenge facing Metro’s next general manager could be significant service cuts, closing down stations or laying off workers.”

“Furthermore,” the report stated, “future metro

projections of ridership levels are bleak for the transit agency's hope to financially cover gaps in the 2023 fiscal year." At best, metro is hoping to see its ridership increase to about 53 percent of its 2019 levels, with a possible 75 percent recovered as of 2024.

This drop is largely due to the federal workforce, a major contributor to ridership levels, shifting over to remote work due to the pandemic. However, government officials hinted that these depressed numbers could be permanent, with Tom Bulger, a Metro Board alternate, telling the *Post*: "I think it's a new normal."

To add to this, Metro reported a week ago that nearly 34 percent of Metrobus revenues were lost to fare evasion last year. This cost the transit's buses over \$10 million. It is unclear how much of these lost fares stem from Metrobus' decision to waive collection during the pandemic.

Wiedefeld's departure, which comes as metro faces a "financial cliff," indicates an expectation of serious struggles ahead as the transit system seeks to impose its budget crisis into the backs of workers and the public.

Before the pandemic, Wiedefeld faced a three-month strike among bus drivers after WMATA sold its Northern Virginia Cinder Bed Road depot to a private contractor. It is likely that future efforts to privatize services will encounter even stiffer opposition among transit workers.

Under these conditions, the last thing transit workers should do is place their fate in the hands of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689. During the strike, ATU 689 forced its public-side transit members to continue to keep workers on the job, even as their fellow members at Cinder Bed Road were on strike.

During the pandemic, Local 689 did little to defend its members as they were infected. It restricted itself to playing cheerleader for the federal government's bailout packages, first from the right-wing Trump administration and then from the Democratic Biden administration, begging it to pass additional bailouts to keep the transit system afloat.

Writing at the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* stated: "[The] ATU is pushing its members behind the Biden presidential campaign, which will do nothing to address the needs of the working class, including funding to protect transit jobs, and ensuring the systems can operate safely as the pandemic continues." A year

into Biden's presidency, this is the reality that metro workers face.



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