

MBTA Orange Line shutdown: The breakdown of Boston-area public transit

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On August 19, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) began what is scheduled as a month long shutdown of the public transit system's rapid transit Orange Line. The closure comes as the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) has ordered "an immediate safety standdown" affecting all workers who operate or secure out-of-service trains at the agency's rail yards.

In 2021, the MBTA had a ridership of 160,557,600. As of the first quarter of 2022, the "T" averaged about 584,100 riders per weekday, serving Boston and surrounding towns in eastern Massachusetts. Ridership plummeted during 2020 and 2021 and has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels.

The 11-mile Orange subway line runs from the city of Malden, north of Boston, to the city's Jamaica Plain neighborhood to the south. The Orange Line normally handles about 100,000 passenger trips per weekday, according to the MBTA.

On August 22, a section of the system's Green trolley line also shut down for the completion of construction work. MBTA officials have also hinted that sections of the Red Line, the system's most-traveled, may also be closed in the near future.

The month long complete closure of a major metropolitan subway line, causing inconvenience and hardship for riders, is an exposure of the decrepitude of the MBTA's infrastructure after years of mismanagement and subordination of the system to debt servicing for its capitalist lenders.

A patchwork of shuttle buses has been added, and transit officials have encouraged people to keep vehicles off the roads as well as commute by bicycle. All this as many businesses are calling on office workers to return to in-person work despite the persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many workers in the low-paid service sector, forced to live outside the city because of astronomical housing costs, are faced with increased commute times, having no alternative to traveling by public transportation.

The shutdown of the Orange Line, combined with cutbacks in Boston-area bus routes, coincides with the new

year of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) as well as the move-in of tens of thousands of college and university students.

BPS opens for classes on September 8. Thousands of students rely on the MBTA to get to school, with many traveling on the Orange Line and city buses. The T is providing shuttle buses to serve many, but not all, shuttered subway stations. Mask mandates are not in place for trains and buses, placing students at heightened risk of COVID-19 infection as they travel to Boston schools where all pandemic mitigation measures have been abandoned with the agreement of the Boston Teachers Union.

The metropolitan area has a college population numbering 200,000 students and thousands of them are moving into dorms and off-campus housing for classes at Northeastern University, Berklee College of Music, Emerson College, Boston University, Harvard, MIT, Tufts, Bunker Hill Community College and other schools. The most recent CDC figures show there are 280 monkeypox infections in Massachusetts, adding further danger to the resumption of in-person classes for public school and college students.

On July 28, the FTA said that the MBTA had fallen short of responding to the agency's order the previous month to bring under control a pattern of disabled trains rolling out of control. The FTA ordered the MBTA to conduct "an immediate safety standdown" beginning 12:01 a.m. July 30, banning any worker from moving rail transit vehicles in maintenance yards or shops until they attend a special safety briefing.

The Orange Line shutdown follows a series of accidents involving passengers and vehicles on the T system-wide, including:

- a May 28 "rollaway" train at Cabot Yard;
- a May 30 "rollaway on the mainline" near Braintree Station;
- and a July 25 incident when a train with faulty brakes slid out of a railyard and onto the main passenger service segment of the rapid transit Red Line near Braintree.

No passengers were aboard these "rollaway trains." FTA Associate Administrator for Transit Safety and Oversight

Joe DeLorenzo wrote in a letter to MBTA General Manager Steve Poftak, “While no injuries have resulted from the recent incidents, uncontrolled train movements, especially on the mainline, are exceptionally dangerous, can result in collision or derailment, and pose a substantial risk of injury or death to employees in the path of the train.”

Prior to the slew of “rollaway” incidents, in April FTA investigators launched a safety management inspection and in June ordered immediate safety fixes to address the most critical issues they uncovered.

In addition to the “rollaway” incidents, the beleaguered transit system has suffered a series of accidents on nearly every line, including buses and the Commuter Rail.

- January 21: Roberta Sausville, 68, was killed when her vehicle was struck at a crossing when the gate failed to close on the Haverhill Line. The MBTA’s preliminary finding was that a signal maintainer for Keolis, the private operator of the Commuter Rail, failed to return the signal gate to its normal operating mode following testing of the safety system.

- April 10: Robinson Lalin, 39, was killed when his arm was trapped in the door of an inbound Red Line train at Broadway Station in South Boston. He was subsequently dragged to his death when his body ended up under the tracks.

- July 22: A Boston-bound Orange Line train caught fire on the bridge over the Mystic River in Somerville. Passengers described smoke filling the head train car, prompting people to break windows to jump down to the tracks before the live electric “third rail” was switched off. One passenger jumped into the river. The MBTA’s Poftak said the fire was triggered by a metal sill that came loose from the bottom of the train, contacting the third rail.

- August 1: A Framingham Line Commuter Rail train lost power during evening rush hour, knocking out its air conditioning “due to an electrical issue,” according to the MBTA, forcing passengers to pry open the train’s doors and climb a fence to safety.

Adding to the misery of T riders, the transit agency announced August 24 that service cuts implemented during the summer on the system’s Red, Blue and Orange Lines would be extended into the fall. Transit officials also said that Green Line service would be reduced and bus service trimmed further beginning August 28.

On June 20, service on the Red, Blue and Orange Lines was reduced for the duration of the summer, reducing weekday service by more than 20 percent on the lines. Weekday service on the three lines was reduced to Saturday levels after the FTA found that the MBTA’s operations control center was dangerously understaffed.

The MBTA had only 17 dispatchers as of July and was

aiming to hire 15 more. The FTA found earlier this year that some train dispatchers have been working 20-hour shifts and directed the T to fill additional positions.

Bus service was cut by about 3 percent in December due to a shortage of drivers, and transit officials said that more cuts would be coming in the fall, with 43 bus routes operating less frequently. The T is advertising for part-time bus operator openings, which it is finding hard to fill.

Bus driver responsibilities listed include “responsibility for the safety of passengers and equipment. Performs routine vehicle inspections to ensure proper operation. Collects fares from passengers and assists in emergency situations.” Pay is \$22.21 an hour and only \$16.25 during training.

Boston Carmen’s Union Local 589, which organizes both rapid transit and bus workers, has posted no information on its website about the Orange Line shutdown and how it is affecting its members.

In June, the MBTA’s Audit and Finance subcommittee approved a balanced \$2.55 billion budget for fiscal year 2023, but the system still faces a \$236 million budget deficit in fiscal 2024 when one-time federal pandemic aid runs out. It could face a budget gap of between \$342 million and \$551 million by fiscal 2027.

Debt service in 2022 accounted for about 20 percent of the MBTA budget. Debt service, including interest and principal payments, accounted for \$491 million in 2020. The system is approximately \$5 billion in debt and, excluding unforeseen calamities, the T is not projected to pay off this debt until 2050.

Meanwhile, the public is paying the price in the form of a dilapidated system that places the lives of workers and riders in danger—the antithesis of a high-quality “public transit” system. A socialist program demands that all people have access to safe, affordable public transportation as a basic right. Transit should be organized according to what the public needs to attend school, commute to work and enjoy leisure activities, not based on indebtedness to giant financial institutions.



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