

Local Democratic Party leaders and corporate media demand Washington D.C. transit workers pay for massive budget shortfall

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The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) is facing a budget deficit of \$750 million as of July 2024, the beginning of the next fiscal year.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, the Washington D.C. transit system has been sustained on a raft of congressional bailouts totaling \$2.4 billion. That funding will come to an end by the next fiscal year, leaving WMATA with a nearly \$1 billion deficit on its hands. Due to anti-public funding statutes enacted at the federal level, the system, popularly known as "Metro," cannot run a deficit in spending.

According to *Railway Age*, "Balancing the budget with service cuts, WMATA says, would require eliminating two-thirds of the agency's existing service, with no service after 9:30 p.m." In addition, "All but 37 of 135 bus lines would no longer operate, customers would wait 20-30 minutes for trains on all lines, and MetroAccess would serve a much smaller area with less hours."

Such cuts would "devastate the region," WMATA general manager Randy Clarke declared in a June statement when the shortfall was noted. It is the second-largest transit system in the United States, serving a pre-pandemic weekly ridership of almost 900,000.

Metro serves the Washington D.C. region, including the neighboring jurisdictions of Virginia and Maryland as well as the capital itself. While other localities provide dedicated sources of funding to their transit systems, WMATA must rely on the combined payments of all three localities, making it critically vulnerable to shifts in funding from the various constituent governments it relies on.

Regional leaders and executives would have the general public believe that funds are non-existent to support vital transportation infrastructure in an exceedingly prosperous area of the country. This is contradicted by the numerous

pro-business infrastructure projects the region carries out yearly.

In 2018, the Maryland government offered the logistics giant Amazon \$8.5 billion to locate its second headquarters in Montgomery County. The state of Virginia clinched the deal, however, with a promise of \$4.6 billion from state and local taxpayer funds.

Like other transit systems since the COVID-19 pandemic hit, WMATA has seen its ridership drop. "Rail ridership is still down 50% since the beginning of the pandemic, as many of the region's white collar workers aren't commuting nearly as often as they used to," NPR noted in June.

The region's leaders, the corporate press and WMATA's management are all seemingly alarmed by the shortfall and the crisis which it poses. "It's just too important to the region, and too many people worked so hard to build this incredible regional asset," stated Clarke to the *Washington Post* in June. However, the various commentators are all of one mind regarding who must bear the cost of fixing the deficit: workers.

Leading this charge, as usual, is the Democratic Party-controlled corporate press. While billions are made readily available for corporate bank bailouts and wars, the capitalist class and its press organs can find little by way of support for the "incredible regional asset" of public transit without deep attacks on the working class.

The *Washington Post* declared in a June 20 editorial statement, a day after the shortfall was announced, that while Congress is likely in no mood "for further increases in Metro funding," exceptions might be made in exchange for "further trims and reforms, for example of labor contracts." NPR is more specific, noting, "Metro's biggest labor contract includes raises tied to inflation, costing the transit agency 20% more in payroll just over

the past two years."

"Our workforce [at Metro] is incredibly important and incredibly valued, and I don't think anybody should be trying to blame the workers for part of [the escalating costs]," said Democratic D.C. council member Charles Allen to the *Post*. However, Allen, who chairs the city's committee on transit did, "think, though, that we've got to look at our overall cost and our structure."

A breakdown of the debt further reveals the class basis on which the local capitalist politicians and managers are choosing to balance its debt.

According to the Eno Center for Transportation, \$288 million is due to depressed ridership during the pandemic. Over \$196 million is due to forfeited jurisdictional subsidies paid to the transit authority by the various states and districts it serves.

States the center: "Apparently, at the start of the pandemic, when municipal governments were dreading a tax base collapse (which wound up not happening), WMATA offered to help out by reducing the amount of operating subsidies to which they were entitled." Finally, \$266 million is owed to "Inflation and collective bargaining agreements," the Eno Center states.

In other words, the majority of the deficit (forfeited regional subsidies and pandemic stimulus) has been caused by forces outside of the workers' and general public's control.

Beginning July 1, Metro initiated a new fare structure. The base fare is dropping from \$2.25 to \$2.00, but they are also changing peak and non-peak rates on weekdays before 9:30 p.m. "For example," notes a local publication, "an off-peak trip into D.C. from Montgomery County that used to cost \$3.85 will now be \$6. The maximum fare is also increasing from \$6 to \$6.50."

Likewise, numerous reports have noted that remote work among workers has led to a drop in ridership. Nearly 40 percent of the transit system's riders are federal workers that have not yet fully returned because the "government and other major employers continue to countenance remote work."

The spiraling crisis in the transit system has caused local leaders to cut corners on public safety beyond COVID-19. In the autumn of 2021, Metro's 7000-series railcars were removed from service on account of an axle defect that was determined to have caused three derailments in one day. They remained out of service for months, leading to an increase in passenger wait times. This caused Metro to hurriedly return the cars to service without ever determining the cause of the defect.

In the face of this mounting public onslaught against the working class, Raymond Jackson, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689, which represents nearly 15,000 workers and retirees, offered little more than bluster. "For [Metro] to say now that we need to look at our health insurance plans and things of that nature and look to cut our benefits when we need them the most—when I have members right now that are still suffering from long-haul covid—I wish they would bring that fight to 689," he said to the *Post* last month.

No faith can be placed in the ATU or any of the other trade union bureaucracies which operate in the region. The ATU tied itself into knots in order to avoid acting upon a strike authorization in 2018, during the last contract negotiations between the local and Metro. The notion that it will now find the heart to fight the attacks when the entire political establishment is demanding workers make sacrifices is laughable.

The crisis in the transit system is leading to an all-out confrontation with the region's working class.

To resist this attack requires a new form of political struggle. Workers must organize independently of the ATU and federal unions, which will only serve to isolate and stifle their opposition and tie them to the Democratic Party, the same forces demanding that they submit to budget cuts.

The critical condition for victory is that workers form independent rank-and-file committees that strive to unify their struggles in order to bring the pro-corporate forces aligned against them to their knees and win demands for livable wages, healthcare as well as safe working conditions.



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