

Chicago faces transit collapse as regional authority warns of “doomsday” cuts without additional funding

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The Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) that services the Chicago metropolitan area, including northwest Indiana and southeast Wisconsin, recently issued a dire warning. The RTA is grappling with a budget shortfall of between \$700 and \$730 million for 2026. Without immediate state and federal intervention, the region’s public transit system faces catastrophic service cuts that will disrupt the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers, students and residents as essential services are dismantled and jobs slashed, crippling public transit in the Chicago area.

The official explanation of the budget shortfall is decreased ridership that has not recovered to pre-pandemic levels, resulting in a fall in fare revenue. But the transit system has long suffered from a lack of investment and has been burdened by laws requiring most parts of the system’s operating costs to be 50 percent funded by fares. Service has been maintained up until this point by federal pandemic relief funding amounting to approximately \$3.5 billion. Now that this funding has been used up, states and municipalities around the country are bracing for a massive reduction in federal funding as the Trump regime is threatening to cut vital funding grants.

The RTA, which serves a population of 10 million, is staring down a “doomsday scenario” if additional funding isn’t secured by spring 2025. The potential cuts would be sweeping, with a 40 percent reduction across the RTA’s component transit agencies, the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), Metra and Pace. Leanne Redden, RTA Executive Director, emphasized the stakes, saying, “If the General Assembly does not act this spring, hundreds of thousands of Illinoisans will wake up in 2026 without a way to get to work, school or medical appointments, with continued uncertainty in future years about their transit services.”

Devastating cuts on the horizon

The CTA, one of the largest transit systems in the country, would bear the brunt of the cuts. Under the proposed reductions the CTA could see cuts to rail service, with at least four of eight CTA rail lines suspended entirely or in part, and over 50 stations closed or severely scaled back. Remaining trains would run 10-25

percent less frequently. Also, up to 74 of 127 bus routes may vanish, leaving 500,000 riders without nearby access. The CTA’s bus network would shrink to fewer routes than cities like Madison, Wisconsin (population 450,305) or Kansas City (1.6 million), a staggering decline.

Metra, the region’s commuter rail system, would see early morning and late evening trains disappear. Weekday trains would run only once per hour, and weekend service would drop to one train every two hours.

Pace, whose buses serve suburban communities, would face dire cuts with elimination of all weekend bus services. Late-night service after 8 pm would be eliminated on 62 routes, and wait times between buses would balloon to 30–60 minutes. Pace’s ADA paratransit services, which operate across the RTA’s service area, would be reduced by 66 percent on weekends, leaving disabled riders stranded.

These cuts would devastate riders, as one in five city workers could lose reliable transit access. The WSWS spoke to riders at Chicago’s Jefferson Park transit hub. They expressed deep concern about the announced budget shortfall, saying the cuts would have a devastating impact on the working class and the region.

When our reporters brought up the allocation of resources to critical services for working-class people, the riders criticized the capitalist system and drew a line between the RTA cuts and the cuts being carried out by the Trump administration. “This is just a continued attack on public services, like with Elon Musk’s DOGE” one worker noted, adding, “Trump is a fascist and has to be stopped.”

Alex, a Jewel-Osco supermarket worker, expressed concern about the budget, saying “From what I see, this wouldn’t really affect me immediately, but I see the overall consequences.”

The proposed service cuts would trigger a devastating wave of job losses across the region. Approximately 3,000 transit employees from frontline operators to support staff and administrators face potential layoffs. But the damage wouldn’t stop there. A network of vendors, contractors and local businesses that either work with transit agencies or depend on transit-using customers and employees would also suffer significant financial blows.

The broader economic consequences would be severe. Reduced

mobility, worsening traffic congestion, and widespread job cuts could drain the region, with \$2.6 billion in lost GDP annually and workers losing millions in wages. RTA warns that ridership could collapse by 90 million trips in just the first year, slashing fare revenue and deepening the financial crisis in 2027 and beyond. These losses would create a vicious cycle, making it even harder to restore services once they're cut.

Several transit workers the WSWS spoke with were unaware of the potential cuts, no doubt because officials from Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 241 and other city unions have concealed the scope of the coming disaster. "Man, I didn't hear anything about this," one CTA worker said. "I don't know why no one is talking about it." Another added, "We need to get the wrong people out of office, but if they try anything, we are going to fight."

A coordinated attack on workers and the poor

The financial crisis engulfing Chicago's transit system is not an isolated disaster; it is part of a broader wave of austerity sweeping across Illinois and the country. While the RTA warns of catastrophic service cuts and layoffs, working class communities are being hit from all sides. School closures, cuts to social programs and attacks on public-sector jobs are on the agenda all while corporate profits soar and billionaires amass obscene wealth.

The RTA is not alone in its budget crisis. Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), which serves the Greater Philadelphia area and is also one of the nation's largest transit systems, released its budget-cutting proposal earlier this month. It would require service cuts of 45 percent, major fare increases, layoffs and a 9 pm curfew for all rail services to address a massive structural budget deficit during the new fiscal year, a glimpse of what is to come. In fact, in a survey conducted by the American Public Transportation Association in 2023, over the next five years half of small transit agencies will experience a budget shortfall as will 70 percent of large agencies.

On Friday, *Chalkbeat* reported that Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is considering laying off 1,600-1,700 school-based workers to cover a \$529 million budget gap, a figure which does not even take into account potential cuts to Chicago's funding for Title I and other federal programs by the Trump administration.

Last Monday, Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson signed an executive order establishing a budget working group that will bring together politicians, business and union leaders, and others to come up with plans for massive budget cuts and layoffs. With the city already facing a budget deficit of \$1.12 billion for 2026, the Trump administration has threatened to withhold an additional \$3 billion in funding. On top of that, the market turmoil caused by Trump's tariff plans has caused the city's pension funds to lose \$1 billion.

Characterizing the situation as a "crossroads," the city's Democratic mayor said, "We essentially need to do more with less," and noted that layoffs "have been on the table for multiple

budgets."

The crisis is not accidental; it is the result of decades of corporate tax breaks, financial mismanagement and the deliberate starving of public services by both corporate-backed parties. The same forces demanding "fiscal responsibility" from working-class communities have no problem handing out billions in subsidies to corporations like Boeing, Rivian and Amazon. Now, as budgets collapse, the Democrats and Republicans alike are making workers pay the price.

The unions, particularly the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and Service Employees International Union (SEIU), are aligned with the Democratic Party and opposed to any serious fightback. Far from organizing mass strikes and citywide protests, the union bureaucracies funnel workers' energy into dead-end lobbying of the same Democratic politicians enforcing austerity. Mayor Johnson, fraudulently hailed by the Democratic Socialists of America as a "progressive," is now pushing cuts while expanding police budgets and corporate subsidies.

Workers cannot rely on the political establishment or the union bureaucracies to defend their interests. The only solution is a militant, independent movement of the working class, organized through rank-and-file committees in schools, transit agencies and other workplaces. These committees must demand:

- No layoffs, service cuts or fare hikes!
- Tax the billionaires and corporations!
- Expropriate the ill-gotten fortunes of the Musks, Pritzkers and other oligarchs!

The working class must unite across city and state and national lines, break from the two-party system, and fight for a socialist program that puts human needs before corporate profits.

The WSWS urges CTA and other transit workers, as well as riders, to share their experiences with layoffs, service cuts, and the broader assault on public transportation.

Fill out the form below to tell us what you're facing on the job or as a rider—your voice is essential in exposing the impact of these attacks and advancing the fight back of the working class.



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