

Philadelphia transit system's “doomsday budget” creates havoc for city residents

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Last weekend, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) began implementing the first phase of service cuts under its “doomsday budget” adopted in June. These reductions included eliminating 32 bus routes, significantly reducing service across all rail lines, and ending special services such as the Sports Express.

The cuts caused longer wait times and severe overcrowding on vehicles. On social media, many commuters posted complaints about trains and buses bypassing them at stops.

“In late spring, we had over 800,000 passenger trips per day. Ridership kept growing,” said SEPTA spokesperson Andrew Busch to ABC News. “That dips over the summer months, but we expect all those people to come back next week, and right now we just don’t have the capacity for everyone to return.”

Alongside these service cuts, SEPTA planned a 21.5 percent fare increase starting September 1, raising the base fare to \$2.90.

The cuts coincided with the start of the school year for nearly 120,000 K-12 students in Philadelphia. About 95,000 students use district-sponsored transportation, including 52,000 who rely on SEPTA student fare cards. According to the School District of Philadelphia, 63 percent of schools reported increased late arrivals, while 54 percent saw a rise in student absences during the first three days of classes compared with the previous year.

These measures stem from a \$213 million budget shortfall and unresolved state transit funding. Pennsylvania’s fiscal year 2026 budget remains two months overdue due to Democratic and Republican disagreements in the state legislature.

State Democrats have proposed funding SEPTA through increased sales tax revenue and other largely

regressive measures. Republicans claim this approach funds poor resource management with a blank check. They propose using the state’s Public Transportation Trust Fund (PTTF), which is primarily dedicated to transit renovations rather than operating costs.

Republicans say tapping the PTTF could sustain SEPTA operations for two years without raising taxes or cutting other programs while lawmakers pursue “structural reforms,” “operational efficiencies,” and other euphemisms for budget cuts and privatization.

On Friday, Philadelphia Common Pleas Court Judge Sierra Thomas-Street issued an injunction against SEPTA, saying the agency “manufactured” its financial crisis and held low-income Philadelphia residents “hostage.”

The injunction ordered SEPTA to halt the planned 21.5 percent fare increase and any further service disruptions. Thomas-Street scheduled a hearing for Thursday to decide if SEPTA should reverse prior service cuts and whether the injunction will be extended permanently.

The day before, the City of Philadelphia intervened by announcing plans to use city funds to restore several transit routes cut by SEPTA that are essential for student transportation. Officials said they would allocate a portion of the \$135 million designated for public transit in the 2026 fiscal year to restore eight bus routes and improve service on 11 others.

Thomas-Street’s ruling reflects anxiety within Pennsylvania’s political establishment about the potential loss of SEPTA, which serves the economically vital southeastern corridor. The injunction is intended to buy time, hoping the state will provide a more tolerable resolution.

The political establishment also hopes to prevent a worsening of already sharp social tensions in the city.

The day before the judge's ruling, 14,000 Philadelphia public school teachers faced a vote on a tentative agreement between the School District and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers aimed at averting a strike during the first week of classes.

Social media groups enforced a gag order on discussions, including frustration over wages that have not kept pace with inflation and restrictive attendance policies penalizing sick days.

This struggle followed an eight-day municipal workers strike in July that halted many city services. The AFSCME union ended the strike with a tentative agreement that, again, failed to meet cost-of-living demands for some of the region's lowest-paid workers, pitting employees against the city's Democratic government.

Notably, Judge Thomas-Street imposed restrictive injunctions in July on the striking city workers, outlawing work stoppages among critical departments and limiting picket line sizes.

It is crucial for Philadelphia workers to take an independent class position on the impending budget cuts and recognize that these attacks on living standards stem from the capitalist ruling establishment. It seeks to make workers bear the consequences of its mismanagement and crisis.

In early August, the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee published a statement analyzing the municipal workers strike. It declared that austerity and attacks on living standards are part of coordinated efforts by both major parties and the union bureaucracy.

The statement emphasized that to avoid sellouts, workers must build independent organizations to counter the combined forces of management and union bureaucracies effectively.

This call applies equally to SEPTA's 5,000 workers, whose contract expires in November.

Rather than passively await inevitable budget and personnel cuts by state leaders, these workers should reach out to the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee to organize a struggle against attacks, independent of their Transport Workers Union leaders, who maintain close ties with city government and help keep workers powerless against employers and a two-party system committed to austerity and war.



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