Judge orders Philadelphia transit system to halt, reverse all service cuts

Nick Barrickman
5 September 2025

On Thursday, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) was ordered by Judge Sierra Thomas-Street of the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas to immediately reverse all service cuts implemented which began in late August.

SEPTA, the main transit system serving the Philadelphia region, faces a significant structural budget shortfall of $213 million for the 2025 fiscal year. The deficit stems from decades of state underfunding and budget cuts. Democratic Governor Josh Shapiro's most recent proposal allocates only $165 million, with negotiations having stalled with the state legislature. Shapiro's offer falls far short of the transit system's needs, leading to its current plan targeting drastic cuts of up to 45 percent in service and fare increases exceeding 20 percent.

"I'm basically guessing on when I should be out there," a Philadelphia resident explained to th*e World Socialist Web Site* about the situation. "The schedule change is bad, but the inconsistency is worse because I can't plan my commute anymore. This bus is basically the only option for me in the morning."

The worker added that the employer "requires me to use vacation time if I'm late to cover … until around fall last year latenesses caused by SEPTA were excused."

A lawsuit brought by riders and advocates contended that SEPTA's cuts unnecessarily harmed low-income and minority riders and that the system could utilize its existing more than $300 million Public Transportation Trust Fund (PTTF) instead of sacrificing critical transit services. George Bochetto, the lead attorney for the plaintiffs, said their legal challenge should "send a message directly to the governor that we need a resolution, that we need the budget passed, and that SEPTA will need additional funding at some point in the future."

The judge's ruling mandated SEPTA to "immediately cease and desist" all route eliminations, service reductions, layoffs and furloughs impacting the transit system, which included the elimination of 32 bus routes, reductions on 16 others, and a broad 20 percent service cut in many areas.

However, the ruling did not halt SEPTA's planned 21.5 percent fare increase that started on September 1, 2025, raising base fares from $2.50 to $2.90.

In response to the ruling, spokesman Andrew Busch stated the transit agency was "evaluating our legal options" about whether it would appeal. The agency has said it needs roughly two weeks before changes can be made. "It was easier to not do anything than it will be to change things," said SEPTA General Manager Scott Sauer.

The problems at SEPTA are part of broader state and national crises facing cities and municipalities. Similar transit funding crises plague cities like Chicago and New York, with Chicago's Transit Authority facing a billion-dollar shortfall, leading to potential massive service cuts and layoffs. These struggles reflect nationwide attacks on public transit driven by austerity and decades of funding starvation.

In Pennsylvania, the state legislature has been stalled for months over negotiations on the fiscal 2026 budget. The budget is currently two months overdue.

Shapiro, speaking to reporters on Tuesday, stated that he was "confident" a deal was possible, "but these two leaders need to make tough decisions," referring to the Republican and Democratic lawmakers that hold state power. Shapiro said, "Part of the decisions they need to make is quieting the extreme voices within their caucuses."

Shapiro has previously voiced support for dipping into the state's PTTF "as a part of a broader package" aimed at financial stability.

In a letter on Friday, SEPTA General Manager Scott Sauer requested access to additional funding from the PTTF, essentially revising its opposition to dipping into the fund, requesting an additional $400 million from the state. Until the ruling on Thursday, SEPTA had argued that this fund is a "working capital account" used daily to pay ongoing bills, such as fuel and salaries.

SEPTA attorney Matthew Glazer stated in court that the plaintiffs' idea to tap into the fund was unrealistic, saying, "Plaintiffs suggest there is some easy, magical fix that

SEPTA has simply overlooked. If only that were true.” He added that using more of the fund would breach PennDOT’s requirement to maintain three months of cash on hand and could force SEPTA to use a costly line of credit.

In issuing the ruling, Judge Thomas-Street is hoping to force the state government’s hand in finding a less drastic solution. The fundamental concern has nothing to do with the fate of Philadelphia’s population, of which 1 in 5 people live in poverty.

This fact was underscored in July when Thomas-Street issued a series of harsh injunctions against striking municipal workers, forcing many back to work while the strike continued. The strike was sold out when the AFSCME municipal union ordered workers back after a tentative agreement that met none of their demands or needs.

Philadelphia municipal workers and educators formed the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee to fight that betrayal and mobilize opposition to pro-corporate policies. The committee’s founding statement says, “our fight is part of a broader struggle against the danger of dictatorship and the return of Donald Trump. … Both parties are in full agreement on bleeding the working class dry to fund Wall Street and war.”

The key concern of the city and state’s business community and elected officials is the region’s economic viability. In this regard, the financial market’s movement in response to the transit crisis is instructive.

On Wednesday, credit rating agency Moody’s changed its outlook on SEPTA’s credit to negative. Baye Larsen, a credit analyst, wrote of bondholders’ concern over “SEPTA’s reduced service levels.” Larsen said: “If this injunction becomes permanent, and the commonwealth does not provide additional funding, then SEPTA would have to rely on reserves to balance its budget, resulting in a stark decline in liquidity.”

The financial interests at play were further revealed by the business community’s response to the threat of service disruption during the start of the professional football season.

On Wednesday, sports gambling company FanDuel announced it would cover the additional operating costs to transport football fans to Lincoln Financial Field on Thursday as the Philadelphia Eagles played the Dallas Cowboys.

The prioritization of business and sports spectacle over the needs of the population prompted the *Philadelphia Inquirer* to remark: “The city’s schoolchildren can rightfully ask why the struggles of football fans—with at most a dozen home games a year—have gotten so much more attention than their own, which are a part of their daily lives.”

Nearly 53,000 Philadelphia schoolchildren and hundreds of educators rely on the transit system. School absences and lateness increased by 63 percent as the budget cuts went into effect.

Workers in Philadelphia must recognize that their interests are not served by any political faction of the establishment. SEPTA workers, who will inevitably face layoffs, increased exploitation and lack of safety resulting from any funding deal reached between Shapiro, the Democrats and state Republicans, must join hands with fellow workers to mobilize against the corporate assault.

In this, their leaders in the Transport Workers Union Local 234 are not on their side. Local President Brian Pollitt has called the service cuts a “black eye for the Commonwealth” and warned that hundreds of union members face layoffs if the funding crisis continues, but he has done nothing to mobilize them to use their industrial strength. Last year, TWU leaders ignored SEPTA workers’ vote to strike as their contract ended, keeping them at work with a one-year contract extension. These betrayals have led workers to the current impasse.

SEPTA workers must join the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee to begin an immediate struggle to prepare for a showdown with management over the brutal planned cuts. In this, they must learn the lessons from the AFSCME District Council 33 municipal strike and Philadelphia educators’ contract struggles.

The School District of Philadelphia faces its own $300 million financial crisis, and teachers are livid over the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers leaders’ move last week to push a vote on a new three-year contract offering below-inflation pay and benefits.

The committee explained at the end of the municipal strike that “It is necessary for workers to establish their own independent organizations as these struggles approach in order to effectively combat the combined will of management and the union bureaucracy.”