

Chicago residents denounce public transit cuts at town hall event

Brian Green
28 September 2025

Defiant commuters packed a town hall meeting at Malcolm X College on September 25 to oppose planned cuts by the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA). CTA officials presented residents with a grim set of choices: massive service cuts or a political miracle from Springfield, all while facing a “doomsday” budget shortfall of up to \$1 billion.

The meeting, framed by the CTA as a “listening session,” placed the entire burden of the crisis on riders and workers, sparking anger and resolve among the more than 100 attendees, who were overwhelmingly young and working class.

The potential cuts, as presented by the CTA, are not merely inconvenient, they are catastrophic. The agency is considering suspending entire rail lines, drastically reducing service frequency and closing stations and bus routes. This would leave hundreds of thousands without reliable transit access.

The economic fallout would be severe. Estimates project a \$2.6 billion annual loss to the region’s GDP, the immediate layoff of 3,000 transit workers, and 90 million fewer rides in the first year alone. This would be followed by a death spiral of reduced revenue and further decay.

Notably absent from the town hall was any significant presence from the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) or the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), whose members would undoubtedly be affected by service cuts of this magnitude. Approximately 90 percent of the CTA’s 11,000-strong workforce is unionized.

WSWS reporters spoke with attendees who came to voice their opposition to any cuts.

Brad said, “I’m just worried if budgets are cut, how am I going to get to and from work? I’m going to have to start looking for a new job.” Addressing the starving

of public services by the oligarchs and both corporate-controlled parties, he said, “Unfortunately, right now we have a few folks at the top who are super wealthy, who are trying their darnest not to pay the money they ought to be contributing to help keep society functioning for all of us. The same society they are benefiting from and drawing surpluses and profits like we’ve never seen before.”

The meeting started with CTA Acting President Nora Leerhsen giving a brief opening speech about the agency’s efforts to “listen” and “connect” on the issues riders face. She outlined challenges the agency has faced over the years, from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 to the end of the federal grants that had assisted the agency until now amidst rising service costs.

The following speaker, Lisa Smith from the CTA’s budget and finance department, gave a brief overview of the current 2025 budget and the challenges moving into 2026, including the funding gap. She explained that it is a cumulative issue and that even if they receive funding, they would need to seek additional money. The CTA is preparing three budgets: one for receiving more funding than needed, a second for receiving just enough to continue operations as they are, and a third, which is currently the most likely scenario, that involves enacting service cuts across the network.

In all, the official presentations offered no concrete solutions, instead fostering a false hope that the Democratic Party in Springfield would deliver a last-minute rescue. This is the same hope that faded when the Illinois General Assembly’s spring session ended on May 31 with no new funding for transit.

In fact, the Democrats are directly responsible for the crisis. The Biden administration allowed federal pandemic relief money to dry up, creating a “fiscal

cliff” for transit systems in Chicago and throughout the US, which used the money to temporarily patch up deficits caused by decades of bipartisan tax giveaways and cuts to public transit.

This situation has only been worsened by the Democrats’ role as enablers for Trump who is moving to slash more federal funding to transit systems. In a September 11 letter to the transit authority officials in Chicago and Boston, US Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy threatened to slash federal funding if the transit systems did not crack down on crime.

“While local leaders seem intent on putting the needs of criminals first, we’re not waiting for the next Iryna,” Duffy wrote, referring to Iryna Zarutsky, a Ukrainian refugee who was fatally stabbed on a train in North Carolina last month. “Chicago and Boston are on notice to take actions that enhance safety and reduce the crime affecting their riders and transit workers—or risk federal support. This is about standing up for American families who deserve a safe and clean transportation system.”

When the floor opened for public comment, the room’s frustration turned into a powerful, unified voice. While safety concerns were raised, the dominant theme was a staunch refusal to accept any cuts. Every demand for full funding was met with thunderous applause.

One attendee pointed to the hypocrisy of Democratic politicians who supposedly champion Chicago in national political fights but abandon city residents when its infrastructure is at stake. The speaker specifically pointed to Governor J.B. Pritzker who has issued pro forma statements against Trump’s threats to deploy troops to Chicago. Far from encouraging mass opposition to the military occupation of the city, the Democratic governor has warned that troops would “inflame passions,” i.e., provoke mass opposition, which the Democrats could not contain.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party who spoke at the town hall meeting provided a perspective and program to fight the transit cuts, including expropriation of the corporate oligarchs to pay for the deepest funding crisis in Chicago’s history. They noted the absurdity of a major metropolitan region begging for funds when, in the last 10 months alone, the 10 wealthiest Americans saw their combined wealth soar by \$703 billion. The solution, they argued, lies not in

trusting the Democratic Party, but in building independent rank-and-file committees in neighborhoods, schools and workplaces to unite all those who rely on public transit.

This perspective resonated deeply. After the meeting, numerous attendees approached to express gratitude for the comments. Discussions spilled over into the interconnected crises of transit, schools and the deployment of federal troops, underscoring the need for a unified working class response.

One attendee, Abraham, said, “What Trump is doing to our city, our society, and our democracy is crazy, and people can’t be on the sideline.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact