

Zohran Mamdani promised free buses; New Yorkers are getting a bus fare enforcement crackdown instead

Daniel de Vries
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New York transit workers: Fill out the form at the end of this article to tell us what you are demanding in the new contract. All comments will remain anonymous.

Soon after winning New York City's mayoral election, Zohran Mamdani quietly shelved the proposal for free bus fare which became a centerpiece of his campaign. Instead, transit officials in New York City are pursuing the opposite goal: Making it easier to identify and penalize riders who do not pay.

At the May 20 board meeting of the state-run Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), New York City Transit President Demetrius Crichlow highlighted the agency's efforts to ramp up bus fare enforcement through its deployment of EAGLE teams, roving squads of MTA Special Inspectors, clad in tactical vests, who board buses to check riders' proof of payment and enforce the agency's campaign against unpaid fares.

Crichlow reported that inspectors are being equipped to issue electronic summonses and that the MTA is piloting fare inspections while buses remain in motion, rather than holding vehicles at stops while passengers are checked one by one.

Although EAGLE fare-inspection teams predate the Mamdani administration, the phaseout of MetroCards and transition to OMNY payment system in January of this year marked a significant new stage in the program. The MTA has expanded checks systemwide to include local bus routes, often targeting working-class areas where non-payment is more common.

The outcome of the promise of free bus fare has lessons for the 40,000 subway and bus workers who have been working on an expired contract for more than two weeks. In contract talks, MTA management is demanding 2 percent annual wage increases (less than half the rate of local inflation), along with a doubling of out of pocket healthcare payments and sharp restrictions on overtime and sick leave. It claims that anything else is "unaffordable" and must be

offset through fare hikes.

In reality, what is "unaffordable" is the 15 percent of its operating budget that goes to MTA's Wall Street creditors. The MTA is among the most indebted transit agencies in North America, carrying tens of billions of dollars in long-term debt accumulated through decades of borrowing to finance capital projects.

Workers should form rank-and-file committees to prepare a fight, appealing for support from the city's riders and the broader working class and fighting for oversight and control over the talks. A struggle must be organized from below. The Transport Workers Union bureaucracy is compromised by its deep relations with the Democratic Party, including both Mamdani and New York governor Kathy Hochul, whom the union endorsed in 2022.

Workers on the Long Island Rail Road, also part of the MTA, had their strike isolated and shut down after three days, and are now being sent ballots on a contract with a meager 4.5 percent increase, barely keeping pace with inflation.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to commuters in East New York who were harassed by transit police for allegedly not paying their fares. One rider, Victoria, explained, "I was on the bus, and I came all the way from East New York bus depot. When I got to Jamaica and Broadway, they pulled me off the bus because my OMNY card wasn't reading a specific time or something like that. And then they wrote me a citation, saying that I don't have to pay anything, but they'll write me a letter saying something."

The OMNY system is notorious for glitches, including payment processing delays. While the MTA claims to be working on the issue, the bugs haven't slowed the enforcement crackdown.

Asked about expanding fare enforcement instead of promised free bus fare, Victoria replied, "In politics, when you are promising New Yorkers something, New Yorkers

are expecting you to give what you're promising. So at this point, I just think that it's unfair that people are getting pulled off the bus for something that a mayor promised us."

During his campaign, Mamdani argued that working-class New Yorkers should not be forced to choose between transportation and other necessities. That message resonated especially in neighborhoods where a \$3 fare is not a minor inconvenience, but a recurring expense borne by people already struggling with the city's soaring cost of living. Implicit in the support for the demand was also the broader question: Why should access to public transportation depend on a rider's ability to pay, rather than a basic social right?

While the free bus demand found broad support in the working class, Mamdani quickly abandoned it once he took office in January. After securing state funding for a modest expansion of childcare, the mayor endorsed New York's openly pro-business state governor Kathy Hochul for reelection and accepted her refusal to fund fare-less bus service, which would have taken place via small income tax increases for the wealthy.

This was coupled with a city budget balanced on the backs of city workers, with Mamdani and Hochul reaching a deal to achieving billions in savings by delaying the implementation of new class-size mandates in public schools and by delaying repayment to city pension funds. Hochul and Mamdani agreed on a plan for a modest pied-à-terre tax, a minor source of additional revenue as a fig leaf so the mayor could claim he delivered on his promise to tax the rich.

Mamdani's pretensions and that of the Democratic Socialists of America, of which he is a member, are being rapidly exposed. His function is to corral the radicalizing sentiment and direct it towards alliances with the Democratic Party establishment and even President Trump, whom he visited twice at the White House.

The MTA's bus evasion crackdown, while not directed by the mayor himself, mirrors the broader policing strategy of the Mamdani administration. On Monday, Mamdani's police commissioner, the billionaire Jessica Tisch, announced the administration's plan to hire an additional 580 uniformed officers by the end of the year.

The new recruits will bring the NYPD headcount to a staggering 35,555 cops, larger than the standing armies of 97 countries, according to World Population Review. This is also an increase compared to the law-and-order administration of ex-cop Eric Adams.

Last month, the NYPD launched its Summer Violence Reduction Plan, the "largest summer deployment in recorded history," according to a city press release. The Mamdani administration also touted its surge of police to "Youth Violence Safety Zones," increasing patrols near bus

stops and commuter corridors.

Beyond the NYPD, more than 1,000 National Guard personnel are on active duty as part of the Joint Task Force Empire Shield, the long-running post-9/11 deployment of heavily armed troops to major transportation hubs and transit networks in New York City.

As a candidate and state legislator, Mamdani frequently denounced over-policing and the use of law enforcement to manage social problems rooted in poverty and inequality. Yet in office, he supports the very institutions he once criticized.

The May 2 confrontation at Wyckoff Heights Medical Center provided a striking example. After hundreds of residents mobilized to oppose an ICE detention at the hospital, NYPD officers moved against protesters, made arrests, and helped clear the scene as federal agents removed the detainee, Chidozie Okeke, who was beaten and tased. Mamdani responded by insisting there had been no coordination with federal immigration authorities, while defending the police response as a matter of public order.

This shows that Mamdani is serving the social interests, not of the city's working class, but the major corporations, real-estate interests, and the financial elite whose wealth depends on preserving existing property relations and political stability.

This outcome was inevitable given his claim that he could deliver his promises within the existing political framework, above all through the Democratic Party. A fight even for the most limited of reforms is unthinkable without the fight to build an independent movement of the working class, rejecting the "right" to profit and taking aim at the entrenched economic and political power of the financial oligarchy.



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