

New York City students protest threat to free transit passes

By Alan Whyte
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Some one thousand students demonstrated on the afternoon of June 11 at New York's City Hall Park against the threat by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to eliminate free access to bus and subway passes known as MetroCards.

Students walked out of several high schools around the city in order to attend. Many held makeshift signs with slogans such as, "Invest in Education, Save Student MetroCards" and "No MetroCard, no future."

Almost 600,000 students use free MetroCards, and their elimination would cost a family over \$1,000 per year for each child who travels to school by bus or subway. This would be an unbearable cost for parents who are already suffering from the economic downturn that has created an official city unemployment rate of nearly 10 percent.

Billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg had only insults for the students struggling to defend their education, saying that they merely wanted "to be cute and be out there and picketing."

The rally was called by the Urban Youth Collaborative, which invited Democratic Party politicians and a Transport Workers Union bureaucrat to speak. While these figures condemned the mayor, they remained silent on the role of the Democratic Party in approving budget cuts that threaten the free student MetroCards.

New York State's Democratic Governor David Paterson and the Democratic Party-controlled state legislature last year cut \$143 million in aid to the transit authority, including money specifically designated for the student passes. In addition to this budget cut, the economic crisis has reduced tax revenues earmarked for the MTA and also caused a reduction in the number of its passengers.

As a result, the transit agency is confronted with an

estimated \$800 million deficit in its operating budget. Its governing board will meet June 23 and may decide on whether or not it will vote to phase out the free passes that have existed in New York City since 1948. This drastic attack on the city's youth would save the agency more than \$200 million per year.

The threat against students' right to an education coincides with the budget-cutting attacks on transit workers. The MTA has already given pink slips to 266 station agents and is seeking to lay off another 210.

The job cuts have been tied up in the courts as result of a legal complaint lodged by the local union, TWU Local 100, which maintains that the MTA did not hold proper public hearings on the closing of the station booths. The MTA has appealed the rulings and has indicated that if it doesn't prevail in the courts, it will hold another round of public hearings in mid-July that will make it legally possible to go ahead with its layoffs, probably by July 28.

The agency has already had public hearings and voted earlier this year for service cuts on the bus and subway that will go into effect on June 27 and will save the agency \$93 million. In tandem with the service cuts, the agency has threatened to lay off more than 550 city bus workers and another 122 city subway workers.

Six hundred administrative jobs will also be cut through a combination of layoffs and early retirement buyouts. The MTA has already imposed a 10 percent fare hike in May of last year and is reportedly considering a 7.5 percent fare hike next year.

The WSWS spoke to a number of students who attended last Friday's rally.

Andrew, a junior at Bayside High School in Brooklyn, told the WSWS, "I think taking the free MetroCard away from students is stupid. Paying to go to public school doesn't make sense. If education is

free you should be able to go to school for free. If they take this away, it will be hard to go to school. It will take a lot of money to go without a free MetroCard. If you take more than two buses to school, transportation would cost over \$100 per month. I think this is like stopping our education.

“Many students will have to go to schools they don’t want to because it will be too far to travel. They are taking away our right to choose our schools. I chose my school because the zone schools are not the best high schools. I chose my school because I am interested in art, and this is a good school for it.

“I see this as a part of the attacks on transit workers and teachers. They can’t just cut off our MetroCards to balance their budgets. It is saying the budget crisis is more important than our education and our future. The governor and the whole state legislature are responsible for this, along with Bloomberg and the MTA. I don’t think Obama is doing a good job, because he is doing nothing about this problem. I haven’t heard him say anything about it.”

Janet a senior at Bushwick Community HS in Brooklyn told the WSWS, “I came here to save education for everyone. A lot of youth from Bushwick Community High School are participating in the rally.

“I was living in Bushwick and then moved to Long Island. Bushwick HS would not transfer the credits to Long Island, and so I am forced to travel to Brooklyn every day. I have to take one bus and one train to get to school. I need the pass. If my mom cannot give me the money, then I cannot go to school.

“My mom works in an office, and my father is a driver for the same company. We live paycheck to paycheck, and we cannot afford to lose the pass.

“The government is giving money to those who have it and taking away money from those who don’t have it.”

Amanda from Cypress-Hill Collegiate Prep HS said, “I am here because I support the cause. Many students walked out of my school. I live near the school, but many of the other students do not. If they cut the passes, then they will not be able to go to school, because many parents cannot afford to buy MetroCards.

“My mom is out of work and so would not be able to pay. She is a nurse, but had a baby and so couldn’t work. Right now, she has unemployment benefits.

“This public school helps us prepare for college. The staff and teachers are very helpful. If these MetroCard cuts go through, a lot of students will not be able to go to school of their choice. They will have to go to schools closer to their home or no school at all.”

Ricardo, a senior at Bushwick Community High School, was angered by the possibility of losing his student MetroCard. “I don’t think it is right that Bloomberg wants to get rid of free student MetroCards. I think he’s making it harder for us to get educated and move ahead in society. That’s why I came here, and a bunch of my friends came too. How can they say we young people are the future and then do something like this? Many kids just don’t have the money.”

Ricardo said that the economic crisis has had a negative impact on his life. “My family and I are getting by on welfare and food stamps, and that’s why I can’t afford to pay for my own MetroCard.”

Ricardo added, “So much money is being wasted on wars and the military. I think people should unite and fight back against these policies that don’t benefit the majority.”

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