

New York governor and mayor trade charges as transit chaos deepens

By Fred Mazelis
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The longstanding feud between New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio erupted anew this week on the issue of accountability for the unprecedented and urgent crisis of mass transit in the New York metropolitan area.

With two derailments in the past month, increasingly unsafe conditions and daily disruptions that have provoked general outrage among commuters and other working people, Cuomo and de Blasio are frantically attempting to deny responsibility by pointing the finger at one another.

In the past few days, the warfare has taken the form of tit-for-tat exchanges between the mayor and Joseph Lhota, the newly appointed head of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). Cuomo, who nominates the MTA chief and controls the majority on the agency's board, named Lhota a month ago. A few days later the governor declared a state of emergency on the city's subways and directed Lhota, who had served an earlier stint as MTA chairman, to come up with a plan for reorganization of the system within 30 days.

That plan is due by the end of this week, and last Thursday Lhota held a press conference to demand the city furnish new money to solve the crisis.

On Friday Lhota stepped up his criticism. "Whenever there is a problem with the subway, the city just throws up its hands or sits on its hand," he told the *New York Times*. Speaking directly of de Blasio, he added, "The lack of collaboration, the lack of empathy for the riders—his citizens—that is the issue here."

The blunt attack on the mayor by the head of a state agency was very unusual, all the more because Lhota had said just one day earlier that he did not want his role to be viewed as political.

Not lost on de Blasio and his advisers is the fact that the Republican candidate for mayor of New York City in 2013, the man beaten by de Blasio in his successful run

for the post, was none other than Lhota. Cuomo's naming of Lhota to the MTA position, in the midst of the deepest transit crisis in recent decades, was another in a series of provocative moves by Cuomo against his rival.

De Blasio responded in kind in an impromptu eight-minute press conference held on a subway train in Brooklyn on Sunday, declaring, "The governor should step up, say once again he's responsible. ... Just take ownership and fix the problem."

On July 24, the de Blasio administration listed its own top five priorities for fixing the system. First Deputy Mayor Anthony Shorris reiterated de Blasio's argument that money is not the problem. The mayor's priorities were vague; they included "immediate relief for riders," "clear accountability for continual improvement" and "a meaningful state commitment to the needs of subway riders."

The Cuomo-de Blasio dispute can only be understood in the context of the breakdown of the system, and the inability of any section of the ruling class and its political hirelings to solve the crisis.

The subway system, which serves 5.6 million riders every day, dates its beginnings to 1904, well over a century ago. The antiquated signal system is 70 years old. The current crisis stems not primarily from the age of the system, but from the lack of necessary maintenance and upgrading, which has been deferred for decades in many areas.

An earlier transit crisis in the 1970s was part of the broader financial meltdown that nearly led to a declaration of bankruptcy. The conditions of the period exposed the contradictions of the postwar capitalist boom, which was rapidly unraveling.

As part of the "reinvention" of New York as a financial center, which included the promotion of tourism and a boom in real estate and luxury development that enriched Donald Trump and others, the transit system was revived,

with billions of dollars spent in the course of a series of five-year capital plans. Subway cars were replaced and air conditioning became standard. The “mean distance between failures” (MDFB), as recently reported on the vox.com web site, rose from the dangerous level of 6,000 miles in the 1970s to 170,000 miles by 2010. In the past five years, this figure has been falling precipitously once again, a reflection of aging cars and equipment.

The capital spending and efforts to catch up on deferred maintenance, beginning in the 1980s, however, were only made possible by the buildup of a massive bond debt, now reaching about \$40 billion. The servicing of this debt eats up a substantial portion of MTA revenues, leading to additional pressure to raise fares and cut service, just at the time when deferred maintenance has once again become an explosive issue, as it was 40 years ago.

The current crisis does not arise because the resources don’t exist for the upkeep and modernization of the system, but because these resources are being siphoned off by the super-rich, including the hedge fund billionaires and real estate developers. The astronomical growth of inequality finds its expression in the form of the transit crisis. This is the price paid for Wall Street’s sucking the lifeblood out of the city and attacking the most basic needs of the vast majority of the population.

Both de Blasio and Cuomo represent this corporate and financial elite. Cuomo, now in his second term as governor, is a cynical political operative. After years of arrogantly rejecting the most minimal reforms—even the proposal for a minuscule tax increase on millionaires to fund the universal pre-Kindergarten program advanced by de Blasio—the governor has executed a calibrated tactical shift in the past year. No doubt looking at the primary votes for Bernie Sanders and thinking of his own possible run for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 2020, Cuomo has begun making a few “left” noises.

The governor has also sought to get political mileage out of events such as last year’s opening of the new Second Avenue subway line in Manhattan, a measly expansion of the system to the tune of a few new stations in a generally middle class area of the city. As de Blasio has suggested, at times like these, the governor suddenly discovers that he is after all in charge of the system.

The mayor is no different, however, and no less cynical. The politician who ran on the slogan of “A Tale of Two Cities” and claimed he would lead a crusade against social inequality four years ago, never uses those words today. He has settled comfortably into his office, cultivating the closest of ties with real estate developers

and other wealthy executives who are bankrolling his campaign for reelection this November.

De Blasio learned his lesson when the ruling elite essentially vetoed his meek request for the tiniest of tax increases. Has inequality lessened in the last four years? Or homelessness? On the contrary.

De Blasio has his own methods of changing the subject, as in his proposals for expanded ferry service and a proposed Brooklyn-Queens trolley connector. The mayor has focused on projects that will, even if fully realized, benefit only a small slice of the population. Meanwhile the crisis of deferred maintenance and a decaying system has erupted. Rather than presenting a program for the necessary drastic upgrading of the system, de Blasio tries to shift attention to Albany’s responsibility.

Transport Workers Union Local 100, which claims to “represent” more than 30,000 bus and subway workers in New York City, has slavishly supported both these Democratic representatives of big business. The union, which issued its own toothless reform proposals this past week in response to the growing crisis, is an integral part of the capitalist status quo. It has collaborated in imposing attacks on its own members along with fare increases, which have hit working class commuters the hardest.

Far be it from either Cuomo or de Blasio, or their backers in the TWU, to suggest that massive increases in taxes on the wealthy are necessary to defend public services. The actions and records in office of both these corporate-controlled hacks demonstrates that only the independent political struggle of the working class, fighting for a socialist program, can defend living standards and all basic rights.

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