

# ?Greyhound axes bus service across Western Canada

By Penny Smith  
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Greyhound Bus Services, North America's largest transportation provider, ceased its Western Canada services on October 31, after operating in the region without interruption for nearly a century. With the exception of the Vancouver-Seattle route, services in the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, comprising some 400 communities, have shut down permanently.

The principal reason for the rapid and sweeping service cuts is the company's desire to boost profits. Senior vice president of Greyhound Stuart Kendrick claimed in a statement that "despite best efforts over several years, ridership has dropped nearly 41 percent across the country since 2010 within a changing and increasingly challenging transportation environment. Simply put, we can no longer operate unsustainable routes." He noted that 415 people will be out of work, 2 million consumers will be affected, and most of the afflicted communities will be left without alternative transportation options.

The closures have devastated regions where no other means of inter-city transportation exists. Residents living in rural and remote areas—notably those in Northern British Columbia, where economic decline, isolation, and lack of amenities are most severe—will be left without safe and reliable transportation for day-to-day necessities such as doctors' and hospital visits, grocery shopping, employment, and education.

Indigenous communities, often located in remote and isolated areas, will be disproportionately impacted by the bus cancellation. Many women living in poverty or fleeing domestic violence will be without safe access to public services. Some will resort to hitchhiking along the notorious Highway of Tears, located near the northern BC town of Prince George, named after the countless missing and murdered indigenous women

who traveled along it. In the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, where the majority of prisoners are indigenous adults and youth, the bus stoppage means regular family visitations will become more difficult to maintain.

The elderly will also be deeply affected by the transportation cuts. Many have relied on the Greyhound bus network to access clinics and hospitals, visit friends and family, and attend funeral services. Eighty-year-old Winnipeg citizen Mary Reimer reported that "since my husband passed away four years ago, this is how I get to my sister."

Unsafe travel is also a considerable issue for those who feel that the cancellation has left them no other choice but to drive themselves. Poor road conditions and inadequately equipped vehicles on treacherous mountain roads will put many lives at risk this winter.

Small businesses operating in remote areas that rely on Greyhound's freight delivery service to transport commercial goods will also be imperiled by the closure. An Alberta resident who manages a store specializing in recreational vehicles near the town of Fort McMurray lamented that "it's getting brutal to get anything up here. We're going to have to scramble now."

Greyhound has made no secret of its struggle to boost profits from its service in Canada. However, when it filed an application for permission to discontinue its Western routes last year, governments feigned astonishment and have since been unwilling to identify or commit to meaningful solutions.

BC Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure Claire Trevena altogether blamed Greyhound for the stoppage in a news release stating that "it's unfortunate that Greyhound did not communicate their plans sooner." She went on to implore the private sector to

“see an opportunity” for a new private bus service.

Similar sentiments and evasive remarks were voiced by officials in other governments. Alberta’s NDP Premier, Rachel Notley, offered her casual opinion that the Greyhound closure is “a national issue that requires a national response.” Manitoba Premier Brian Pallister declared that “obviously, we hope that the private sector responds.”

In the province of Saskatchewan, Premier Scott Moe announced that his government would not be providing any subsidy to keep Greyhound operating and hoped that the private sector would “have a look at these main routes.” His remarks are entirely insincere. Just last year, the Saskatchewan Party government, in which Moe was then serving as environment minister, shut down the Crown-owned Saskatchewan Transportation Company (STC) after 72 years of service. More than 200 bus workers were thrown out of a job? One year later, with Moe having replaced Brad Wall as premier, just two out of the ten companies that had initially competed on the former STC routes remain.

For his part, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau reacted to the closures with a phony appeal for Transport Minister Marc Garneau to work with the provinces “and see what paths forward there are.” However, Transport Canada concluded that it isn’t the role of the federal government to provide subsidies to Greyhound, and no federal programs exist to subsidize a private inter-city bus carrier. Garneau, in lockstep with the provincial authorities, expressed his desire for private sector solutions. “The loss of Greyhound’s presence in Western Canada will depend on the speed and extent to which other entrants fill the market,” he said in a public statement.

Apart from the initial public statements—composed of hollow rhetoric, appeals to private corporations, and opportunistic indictments of Greyhound—Ottawa and the provincial governments said little and did less about the impending the transportation crisis from July through October.

Then, in the immediate aftermath of the October 31 shutdown, some of the provinces took feeble and entirely inadequate steps. In BC, the NDP government has initiated a one-year temporary pilot project, BC Bus North, launched with an operating budget of a paltry C\$2 million. In Alberta, the NDP government has made a miserable C\$1.4 million commitment over

two years to its Rural Transportation Pilot Program. Both of these services are vanity projects entirely limited in scope and funding that will serve as public relations tools to promote the NDP brand and its supposed orientation towards blue collar workers.

The provincial and federal governments’ near-total impairment when confronted with the unprecedented closure of one of Canada’s most crucial public transportation services confirms that they have no interest in ensuring the provision of basic social infrastructure. Their flagrant commitment to the same market-based conditions that precipitated the closures to begin with demonstrates their readiness to subordinate indispensable public services to the impulses of private capital.

The unfolding bus transportation crisis is the result of decades of pro-business legislation, massive sell-offs of publicly held assets, corruption, and personal enrichment. The ruling class has rendered all levels of government incapable of responding meaningfully to the basic social needs of the country. The continual evasion of responsibility by government will only result in the further privatization of services, and more misery and suffering for the greatest number of Canadians.

The Greyhound bus service closure is an entirely working-class issue. The sections of society that feel the impact most acutely are low-income earners, pensioners, the unemployed and marginalized living in economically depressed rural and remote communities ravaged by decades of neglect.

The only progressive way to combat such social evisceration is to fight for a socialist perspective and program that demands privately owned essential services such as transportation be expropriated and placed under the control of a worker-led government so they can be operated as public utilities.

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