

Boston transit system limps along as MBTA carries out disruptive repairs

By Andrew Timon
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The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) has begun a five-year program to make needed repairs to tracks, stations and other infrastructure. Needed repairs to the transit system that serves Greater Boston, also known as the “T,” total an estimated \$7.5 billion.

The unprecedented repair schedule will require the shutting down of core sections of the T’s Red, Orange, and Green lines every weekend beginning in September, diverting and severely impacting hundreds of thousands of commuters each weekend. Shuttle buses will be provided at those “rapid transit” stations affected by the shutdowns.

Rather than only working during limited overnight hours, as was originally scheduled, the MBTA says that they can shorten repair times by between 4 and 11 months, depending on the line, finishing all work before January 2020 at the earliest by adding an additional 4 to 6 weekend diversions to each line’s repair schedule.

These repairs, if finished on time, will not be the end, but a prelude to the delays and repairs to come in 2020. The MBTA says that it is in the process of preparing an aggressive schedule of shutdowns for the 2020 construction season that may even include weekday shutdowns in addition to a greater frequency of weekend shutdowns.

The news is the latest in a series of failures of a system which has literally seen aging cars fall off the tracks. After five train derailments thus far this year—and a record number of derailments from 2014 to 2018, an astounding 43—along with mass delays and commuter outrage over fare hikes, the MBTA is in crisis mode, attempting to maintain the facade that its first commitment is to its riders’ safety and efficiency of travel.

This year’s June 11 Red Line derailment outside of the JFK/UMass station is still causing delays. A 50-year-old train struck and damaged multiple signal “bungalows” outside of the station that house Red Line signal system hardware and equipment. This equipment controls the intricate system of tracks, signals, and switches where the Ashmont and Braintree branches diverge on the Red Line.

Without the signal system, each Red Line train must be given permission to proceed from one station to the next with personnel along the tracks physically directing trains’ routing. The process of manually moving each train through each station in these sections of the Red Line has required about 57 personnel in the field every day.

The cause of the June 11 derailment won’t be released by the MBTA until September 16, but the investigation has narrowed it down to the half-century-old train car or its wheel truck that was last replaced in 2014.

The anger of riders over the decrepit state of the T has been further fueled by new fare hikes implemented on schedule on July 1. This coincided with the issuing of bonds, which are also issued yearly on the same date. This is a clear message to banks and bondholders that their interests will be upheld, despite the growing dissatisfaction of commuters.

Projected fare revenue, along with the state’s dedicated sales tax to the MBTA, are used as collateral in the issuing of bonds to bondholders. By raising fares, the MBTA can further fill the ever increasing IV bag of principal debt to bondholders, which, filled with the sweat of transit and commuting workers, has transfused hundreds of millions, often exempt from taxes, year after year into the pockets of wealthy investors. That being said, the amount raised from fare hikes is a

minute fraction of the debt owed by the T.

Principal debt on bonds are higher than they've ever been, growing substantially over the past decades, from \$3.8 billion in 2001 to \$5.7 billion in 2018. The total amount paid in interest to bondholders from 1991 to the present comes to approximately \$6 billion. With such a large amount of profit leached from the body of the MBTA it is no wonder that such an immense backlog of repairs is needed and that fares keep increasing.

The MBTA's 2020-2024 capital investment plan shows that this trend will continue as a substantial amount of funding, approximately \$3.5 billion, for much needed repairs will consist of "proceeds" from new bonds.

The MBTA is pledged to "considering" fare increases every two years as allowed by law. It is also ramping up efforts to increase its Farebox Recovery Ratio (FRR), the fraction of operating expenses representing the fares paid by passengers. Again, funds obtained from increasing the FRR will do little to offset the T's huge debt.

Comments on the MBTA's Twitter feed reveal overall dissatisfaction with service and fares as well as the crucial role it plays in the life of commuters. In response to yet another, now daily delay, one rider wrote: "Glad to see those fare increases helping you stay on time. At least it is Labor Day, so I can't get fired today." Another wrote, "Lmao I have an idea to fix the issues ... more fare hikes #sarcasm"

MBTA funds don't just get siphoned off by bond interest payments. In December 2017, the MBTA awarded an over \$700 million contract for the development of an all-electric fare collection system which disallow cash payments while allowing for payments to be made with the tap of a credit card or phone.

Cubic, the company awarded the contract, not only works with transportation terminals and technology, but mainly with the US military and its allies. The company's website notes: "At Cubic Global Defense, we develop innovative and realistic training solutions for the United States and allied forces in more than 35 nations. Leveraging decades of experience and cutting-edge technologies, we help our customers effectively equip and train warfighters and law enforcement personnel, in turn making the world a safer place."

As governments around the world are more and more brutally suppressing workers strikes and protests with the help of newer technologies, a company like Cubic working on a transportation project where workers and commuters tap to get in and out of train stations, primarily with smartphones, should come as a warning.

After the record snowfall of February 2015 shut down the entire MBTA multiple times, the MBTA sought and received a three-year waiver to 1993 legislation that places certain restrictions on the privatization of public services in Massachusetts. The system projects it will save \$450 million over the next decade.

By far, the largest savings—\$215 million—will come from 2016 contract renegotiations with the Carmen's Union Local 589, the T's largest labor union. The union gave up drastic concessions on wages and work rules under the threat of privatization.

A similarly rotten deal was agreed to by Local 264 of the International Association of Machinists under threat by the MBTA to privatize bus repair work at three garages. Those concessions will save the T \$4.1 million a year. Both contracts allow future privatizations outside of the system's core service.

The eight unions that represent MBTA workers have consistently refused to mount a united struggle against privatizations and in defense of union members' jobs, wages and benefits, action that would be welcomed by the public as part of the fight to improve the health and quality of the entire system.

It is impossible to resolve the MBTA's crisis within the framework of the capitalist mode of production. Only a socialist reorganization of society can free up the resources to make the needed repairs to the system's failing infrastructure. The debt to the MBTA's private bondholders must be repudiated and the system established as a truly public utility under the control of the workers who actually make it run and those who utilize its services.

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