

Transit agencies and governments continue to expose workers and riders to coronavirus pandemic internationally

By Sam Dalton
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Mass transit systems across the globe are in acute crisis in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. While service continues at varying capacities internationally, the deadly conditions facing transit workers and the vulnerability of mass transit systems have impacted nearly every corner of the planet.

The increasing number of deaths and threatened collapse of transit systems are not, in the final analysis, primarily the result of the lethality of the COVID-19 virus, but rather the outcome of an ill-prepared and criminal response by the ruling class to a foreseeable public health crisis.

In the United States, at least 61 transit workers have died from COVID-19 at the epicenter of the pandemic in the New York City, as well as four school bus drivers. In Philadelphia, at least three transit workers have died from the virus. Across the country transit workers have died in Chicago, Boston, Detroit, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Newark, Austin, New Orleans, and in Washington state, Virginia, and Connecticut. Given a scarcity of information and the failure to report deaths outside hospitals in the US, the number of fatalities and geographical extent of the crisis is likely much greater.

A similar situation exists in Europe. In the United Kingdom, at least 14 of 28,000 Transport for London (TfL) workers have died from the virus. Régie Autonome des Transport Parisiens (RATP) has confirmed the deaths of at least three of its 63,000 workers.

These deadly conditions and the contempt for workers' safety are provoking intense anger and a growing rebellion, with wildcat strikes or job actions having taken place by transit workers in Detroit, Birmingham, and San Diego, and bus drivers threatening to strike most recently in Los Angeles.

Transit workers in all corners of the globe are being

forced to interact with hundreds and thousands of individuals on any given day and in most places continue to work without basic personal protective equipment (PPE). Conditions in New York are only a foreshadowing of the deaths that will result from an uncontrolled spread of the virus in underdeveloped countries, or the premature slackening of social distancing being planned in the advanced economies.

In the US, Europe and elsewhere, the response of governments has been guided by an overriding consideration: the defense of corporate and financial profits.

The crisis threatens the wider collapse of mass transit systems, many of which were already in dire straits due to decades of systematic attacks on funding from capitalist governments the world over. Huge declines in ridership as a result of the pandemic, the cessation of fare collection, and the knock-on effects of the crisis on other forms of revenue mean that transportation systems are facing collapse. As millions of essential workers, including health care workers, are forced to rely on mass transit to get to work, the social consequences of any such collapse would be catastrophic.

Following an 87 percent decline in ridership in March from the same period last year, the Metropolitan Transport Authority (MTA) in New York, which employs 72,000 workers, saw its bond rating downgraded by S&P Global amidst what MTA Chairman Patrick Foye described as the authority's "biggest liquidity crisis ever." Already \$44 billion in debt, the operation of the MTA has been increasingly subordinated to the profits of its bondholders in recent years. While the MTA is unable to provide its workers with basic PPE, in 2019 over 16 percent (or \$2.6 billion) of its operating budget was spent on repaying bondholders.

Fare revenue has collapsed throughout the US. Other forms of income for transit authorities, such as sales taxes in Illinois, payroll taxes in Portland, Oregon, and parking fees in San Francisco, have also rapidly declined. Overall, *transitcenter.org* estimates that US transit systems face a deficit of \$26-40 billion.

In Europe, French RATP ridership is down 70 percent. Tube ridership in London was down 88 percent and bus usage down 76 percent, according to Transport for London (TfL) data. TfL's best case scenario estimates it will lose £500 million in income due to the crisis.

The response of transit authorities and unions to the deaths of workers internationally has been one of criminal indifference. The veneration of workers and crocodile tears shed for those who have died are cynical attempts to mask this callousness. In reality, the primary concern has been to keep workers on the job and convince them that working conditions are safe, despite the failure to provide basic safety equipment.

On April 10, the WSWS reported that following the deaths of 14 London bus drivers, TfL and the Unite union released a joint statement, declaring, "PPE should be reserved for those working directly with people experiencing COVID-19 [i.e. health care workers]." The claim that it is impossible to provide all essential workers with protective equipment—even as trillions are being handed over in a matter of weeks to the major corporations and banks—is a brazen lie and an attempt to pit workers against each other.

In France, RATP President Catherine Guillouard gave an interview on Saturday to France3 in which she praised transit workers fighting "on the frontline of the COVID-19 crisis." Despite the fact that the lockdown in Paris began almost a month earlier on March 16, the RATP only began to distribute surgical masks to its employees on April 8. Transit workers in other French cities continue to work without any PPE whatsoever. The dangers facing French transit workers are a direct result of the Stalinist Confederation of Labor's isolation of a six-week transit strike in December and January.

In New York, the MTA, working alongside Transportation Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, initially tried to placate workers' anger with the provision of surgical masks. Following more outrage, the limited provision of N95 respirator masks finally commenced late last week. Similar measures were taken in Boston by Carmen's Union Local 589, which represents 6,000 transit workers.

The response of the TWU is a continuation of the role it

played in facilitating further attacks on workers in the sell-out contract it pushed through in January. The TWU was silent as MTA Chairman Pat Foye, echoing president Trump's remarks, attempted to distract from the blood on his own hands by discrediting the World Health Organization (WHO) in a letter to the *New York Times* defending the MTA's response.

Despite the TWU's failure to demand mass testing for workers and its celebration of the provision of inadequate PPE, TWU Local 100 President Tony Utano hollowly declared that "we will come out stronger with tighter bonds after we defeat this evil virus."

Mass transit systems provide conditions for the virus to rip through large sections of the population in a very short time. Their continued operation without adequate safety measures has already led to thousands of unnecessary deaths, and will no doubt contribute to many more unless workers take matters into their own hands. The failure to protect the masses from the threat of COVID-19 is not the product of a few bad apples in positions of power in the transit agencies, the unions or in government. The incompetence and criminality of the response reflects the bankruptcy of the capitalist class, which subordinates the welfare of billions to its insatiable desire for profit.

The crisis engulfing international mass transit, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, is one of the sharpest expressions of the wider conflict between the profit interests of a tiny minority of oligarchs and the life-and-death needs of the working class, the vast majority of society.

What is required is a unified movement of workers across national borders, independent of the trade unions and capitalist political parties, in a struggle for the immediate redirection of resources away from the corporations and towards combatting the pandemic and ensuring the safety of the population. This must be carried out as part of the fight for socialism, including the placing of the major corporations, transit systems, and other vital infrastructure under the democratic control of the working class, in order to run them to meet social need, not private profit.

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