

The Subways in New York City Should be Free

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Global Research, February 22, 2019

[SocialistWorker.org](#) 1 February 2019

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

Last month, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio finally launched his [eagerly anticipated Fair Fares program](#) offering half-price transit fares for low-income New Yorkers — but the early reviews were decidedly mixed.

The first phase of the program will make weekly and monthly unlimited-use MetroCards (NYC bus and subway fare cards) available at half price to some 30,000 New Yorkers, with another 100,000 to be added to the program in April.

Advocates quickly pointed out that these totals fall far short of the estimated [800,000 New Yorkers who currently live below the federal poverty line](#), and accused de Blasio of failing to live up to the [grandiose promises](#) he made when announcing the program last year.

Given that an astounding [one in three poor New Yorkers are unable to pay for public transit](#), it's critical for activists to fight for Fair Fares to be expanded as rapidly and widely as possible.

But socialists should also use this opportunity to ask why *anyone* in New York — or anywhere else — should have to pay a fare to use the subways.

It's time to claim public transportation as a basic right — a service that should be available to all people, and fully funded not through fares, but through progressive taxation of the city's wealthy businesses and individuals.

After all, while it is primarily working people who ride public transportation every day, it's our bosses who reap the benefits from our daily commutes.

As [Vincent Michael wrote in SW](#),

“[V]iable transit systems are vital to the larger capitalist economy, connecting workers to employers and consumers to products, and enabling urban development, from which the real estate, construction and financial industries profit.”

Whether you're a local on your way to work or a tourist headed into the city to see a show or do some shopping, capitalists need you to be able to get where you're going. Disrupt the flow of workers or consumers by removing mass transit, and the whole system threatens to break down.

As gentrification pushes us further and further away from the central areas where many of us work, our commutes get longer, we spend increasingly more time in buses and our

crumbling subway system, and our quality of life suffers accordingly — especially for those who work more than one job.

Meanwhile, those who can't afford to pay are left with a choice of geographic isolation or risking criminal punishment. New York City has reduced arrests for turnstile jumping, but [over 5,000 people were still arrested last year](#) for not being able to afford a Metrocard, while another 53,000 were issued summonses.

All in all, not only do capitalists rely upon public transportation to maintain the flow of workers, and therefore the goods and consumers on which their profits depend, they also play a decisive role in setting the terms under which the transit system is accessed.

So why shouldn't they pay for it?

"Oh, but we do," they may say. After all, we pay taxes...

We need look no further than the [\\$3 billion in tax breaks and other incentives](#) that the city and state of New York recently lavished upon Amazon to see how hollow this protestation truly rings.

But even when the government does collect taxes to fund the transit system, the money has a curious habit of going astray. [A 2017 report by the New York Times](#) revealed how Republican and Democratic administrations alike have repeatedly "cut the subway's budget or co-opted it for their own priorities" over the preceding 25 years:

They stripped a combined \$1.5 billion from the M.T.A. [Metropolitan Transit Authority] by repeatedly diverting tax revenues earmarked for the subways and also by demanding large payments for financial advice, I.T. help and other services that transit leaders say the authority could have done without.

They pressured the M.T.A. to spend billions of dollars on opulent station makeovers and other projects that did nothing to boost service or reliability, while leaving the actual movement of trains to rely on a 1930s-era signal system with fraying, cloth-covered cables.

They saddled the M.T.A. with debt and engineered a deal with creditors that brought in quick cash but locked the authority into paying \$5 billion in interest that it otherwise never would have had to pay.

In one particularly egregious example, [current Governor Andrew] Cuomo's administration forced the M.T.A. to send \$5 million to bail out three state-run ski resorts that were struggling after a warm winter.

During the same period, the fare for a single subway or bus ride went through [a total of six increases](#), from \$1.25 in 1992 to \$2.75 today — with a further rate hike [expected to take effect in March](#), and additional increases likely after that.

"Without new revenue or significant service cuts," [the Times reports](#), "fares might have to rise by an additional 15 percent in the coming years to address the agency's growing deficits."

Considered as a percentage of overall operating costs, the city's fare revenue has actually

remained fairly steady over the past 15 years, averaging a little under 40 percent, which is even down a little from around 42 percent in the early 2000s.

Yet in terms of actual dollars and cents, the fares keep going up because during this same time period, the MTA's operating expenses have more than doubled, from \$7.6 billion in 2003 to \$16.9 billion in 2017.

After [decades of underfunding and mismanagement](#), the New York City transit system is well and truly [falling apart](#), and repairs and modernization efforts can no longer be put off.

Yet even in this moment of dire need, the idea of raising the necessary funding through a tax on wealthy businesses and individuals evidently remains unthinkable. Instead, the politicians claim to have no choice but to squeeze more and more money out of transit riders.

Inevitably, this squeeze is felt most keenly by the neediest members of society. A bus or subway fare, like any flat charge, is inherently *regressive* — that is, it places a heavier burden on a poor person than on a wealthy one, since it constitutes a higher percentage of the former's income.

In addition, as the city's transit infrastructure continues to crumble, New Yorkers who can afford to use alternative means of transportation — taxis, ride-sharing services, commuter rail, etc. — are [doing so in ever-increasing numbers](#).

This means that, to an ever-greater degree, the people left riding the buses and subways tend to be those who cannot afford any other option. And it is to these people that the authorities turn, again and again, to demand more money in the form of higher fares.

We must instead demand a progressive funding solution: a tax scheme that is structured to ensure that the wealthier a company or individual is, the greater their contribution will be to the funding of the public transportation system that keeps their empires running.

The goal of this tax program must be, expressly and from day one, to eliminate fares altogether, so that all people will have access to public transportation free of charge.

Needless to say, the Fair Fares program is nothing of this kind, but it merits closer attention nonetheless.

[According to the New York Times](#), only the 30,000 New Yorkers who are both employed and receive cash assistance from the city and are employed are initially eligible for the program, which is set to expand in April to 130,000 people who both are employed and receive federal food stamps.

The fact that this plan is only available to people with jobs is a bitter irony, [given de Blasio's claim](#), when announcing the program last June, that "I don't want to live in a city where someone is desperate to get a job, but they can't get to the job interview."

By excluding the unemployed, the program instantly shuts out many of the poorest and neediest New Yorkers, affecting not just their ability to find work, but also their access to health care and other needed services.

Underlying this requirement is the neoliberal creed of "personal responsibility": if you are

poor, it is in some measure your own fault. We are willing to help you (grudgingly, and only a little), but first you must show us that you are doing your part and helping yourself by working.

While the employment requirement is an especially punitive aspect of the Fair Fares program, it has the more general flaw of all social programs that rely on *means-testing* — the idea that, in determining eligibility for government aid, a person's ability to pay some portion of the costs themselves should be taken into account.

Means-testing rests on two assumptions: first, that people should generally pay their own way; and second, that the amount of money available to help those who cannot pay their own way should be strictly limited, and should be given out only to those who can demonstrate the highest degree of need.

In the case of the Fair Fares program, the threshold for establishing need is the Federal poverty level — defined as an annual income, for a family of four, of around \$25,000.

In addition to shutting out the many equally needy people whose income places them on the “wrong” side of this cutoff — particularly in a city with as high a cost of living as New York — the Fair Fares program's reliance on means-testing produces at least two more harmful consequences.

First, it stigmatizes the beneficiaries of government aid, branding them as “burdens on society” who are unable to carry their own weight like “regular people,” and leaving them exposed to future budget cuts and political attacks.

This stigma may be even more keenly felt as transit fares continue to rise for the general public, increasing resentment toward those to whom the program gives assistance.

Of course, this resentment would more justly be directed at the authorities who — instead of coming up with a solution that would offer relief to all transit riders, let alone actually fix the broken transit system — content themselves with providing a limited amount of funding to public transportation somewhat more affordable for a limited number of people.

The second consequence, which flows from the first, is that by focusing on “affordability,” means-testing helps to perpetuate the view of basic services (not just public transportation but also health care, access to education, and so forth) as commodities to be bought and sold under market conditions.

We must instead insist that public transportation (like health care and all the rest) should, in fact, be regarded as a *public good*, a service available to all members of society as a basic right.

There are two broad categories of objection to free public transportation: first, that eliminating transit fares will lead to huge additional operation and maintenance costs as the system struggles to keep up with the dramatic increase in ridership; and second, that it will open the floodgates to a host of “problem riders.”

Let's consider “problem riders” first. The idea here is that when fares are eliminated, the transit system is opened up to people who should ideally be kept out: criminals, vandals, vagrants, truant kids and so on. These people are said to drive up security and maintenance costs and push “legitimate” riders out of the system.

Clearly, it is in everyone's interest for the public transportation system to be safe and clean, and for riders to feel confident that they will not be attacked or molested while using it. But "problem riders" obviously reflect a set of social problems that need to be addressed. Their existence does not constitute a justification for rejecting the idea of free public transportation, any more than it would justify permanently closing all public parks.

What it does, rather, is demonstrate that free public transportation is only one of a number of different programs we will need in order to transform our cities into spaces that exist for the benefit of all people.

As for cost, there is obviously no getting around the fact that making a major metropolitan transit system free for all people will cost a *lot* of money.

Yet there seems always to be money available to hand over to big corporations or to fund politicians' pet projects. In the end, this is a matter, not of what *can* be done, but of what we our leaders are *willing* to do — and of what we are willing to demand that they do.

After all, even New York City's own [Mayor Bill de Blasio could say recently](#), and without apparent irony: "Brothers and sisters, there's plenty of money in the world. There's plenty of money in this city. It's just in the wrong hands."

It's time to redistribute that money to pay for public transportation.

A person's ability to travel from one part of the city to another, whether to go to work (or find work), visit friends or family, explore a museum or park or whatever else, should not be contingent on their ability to pay. It should be theirs by right. After all, it is *their* city, built and maintained and developed on the fruits of their labor.

But to truly make public transit available to all people, as a basic right, will require far more than simply eliminating fares.

To begin with, existing transit systems will need to be overhauled, modernized and greatly expanded to accommodate the increase in ridership while providing timely and reliable service. And these repairs, improvements, and expansions will take time — and money.

In the longer term, transit routes must be transformed to meet the needs of the community. This means bringing an end to ["transit deserts"](#) — neighborhoods with inadequate or nonexistent public transportation coverage.

And to fully achieve this objective will require not just the expansion of transit lines into these neighborhoods, but also, ultimately, a radical restructuring of our cities, which until now have been shaped by the interests and whims of capital, in ways that will instead benefit all members of society.

The challenges are certainly daunting. But a crucial first step is simply to be clear about our basic demand: Public transportation should be made free for all people, and big capital should pay for it.

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[Christopher Baum](#) argues that a new plan to reduce fares for some low-income riders in New York City is a good start, but that we need to set our sights much higher.

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