



Transformative Talks for Community Resilience

May 2020

Essential or Sacrificial: Protecting Transit Workers and Riders

Transit workers are essential workers, as are many of the current riders of public transit. However, policies and practices have not treated these individuals as essential members of our community, instead signaling to them that they are “sacrificial” in order to keep society functioning.

In the past couple of months, transit workers have experienced confusing and conflicting policies and as a result, many distrust management and institutions that are supposed to protect workers. For example, in New York some workers have had to rely upon mutual aid networks to get personal protective equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies. Transit workers are also having to fill the role of first responders and social workers to meet the needs of riders. Many transit workers who have fallen sick are returning to work, which can be a source of trauma as they may not have been given the time or space to grieve the loss of co-workers and friends.

Transit has experienced a high decline in ridership and transit agencies are cutting frequency and routes. However, some of those routes are serving essential workers and are operating at high capacity due to service being cut. For example, in Los Angeles, LA Metro cut back bus service hours by 29% and 14% on rail, yet 70% of transit riders rely on buses and these cuts are impacting essential workers and communities of color most. In addition to crowding, people are being violently pulled from buses as we saw in Philadelphia by law enforcement for not wearing a mask. Furthermore, exclusionary policies like the “one bag policy” in Los Angeles is creating a lot of difficulty for people that do not have a place to shelter in place and those who use transit to transport their essential goods.

A Call for Solidarity

Many transit workers and riders are Black and Brown and are the very same communities that are being hit hardest by COVID-19. These examples above show the need for a public health response that protects both transit drivers and riders, not punitive policies and practices that endanger the bodies of Black and Brown people. Some policies and protocols may also be pitting drivers against riders, such as directives to forcibly remove the unhoused or people not wearing masks from platforms and buses.

“Who wins and who loses” can not be the framework to guide policy decisions to support transit workers and transit riders. If there is a policy to support transit workers that hurts other parts of the community, then we are selecting who lives and who doesn’t live. We don’t have to make those choices. We must continually ask, how are we advocating for policies that keep both the workers and riders safe. There needs to be greater solidarity between transit workers and riders and broad cross-movement organizing to ensure a just recovery that includes both workers and riders.

The conditions created by the pandemic drive home the fact that we essential workers – workers in general – are the ones who keep the social order from sinking into chaos. Yet we are treated with the utmost disrespect, as though we’re expendable. Since March 27, at least 98 New York transit workers have died of Covid-19. My co-workers say bitterly: “We are not essential. We are sacrificial.”

*Sujatha Gidla, M.T.A. Conductor,
NYTimes Op-Ed: May 5, 2020*

How do we demonstrate to people that they are essential?

We need to move beyond nightly cheers to demonstrate to the people that are essential. The following is what we heard from the community during the participatory panel discussion. This is by no means a comprehensive list of recommendations to ensure mobility justice for transit workers and riders. We encourage transit agencies to, first and foremost, listen to transit workers' and riders' stories, experiences, needs, and recommendations to help shape protocols, policies, and operations, and provide the type of support they need.

- » Include transit workers and core transit riders in transportation planning and pandemic planning process.
- » Allow for public meetings and special accommodations so that people can participate safely and provide public comments to inform decisions.
- » Advocacy groups should employ creative approaches to continue to connect with transit riders and workers (via surveys, flyers, etc.) and include community members in direct advocacy opportunities and inform advocacy agendas.
- » Provide transit workers with PPE (gloves, masks, sanitizer).
- » Ensure hazard pay for transit workers.
- » Provide additional paid sick leave for transit workers experiencing COVID-19.
- » Increase sanitation on buses, trains, stops, and platforms.
- » Hold space for healing and provide grief counseling and mental health services for transit workers.
- » Remove exclusionary policies, like the "one bag" policy, that disproportionately negatively impacts unhoused and core transit riders who use transit for essential trips.
- » Implement rear door boarding on buses to protect drivers and passengers.
- » Provide clear guidance, supported by CDC guidelines, on when transit workers who have had COVID-19 can return to work safely.
- » Stagger crew schedules to prevent crowding in transit workers' crew rooms.
- » Identify routes that essential workers rely upon most and are at capacity to increase transit frequency to allow for physical distancing.
- » Operate in care and empathy and provide shelters and resources to the unhoused, rather than forcibly removing people from public spaces through sweeps.
- » Distribute masks to transit riders who do not have one and ensure hand sanitizer and masks dispensers are in locations where those with disabilities can access.
- » Invest transit funding into the transit system and not into increased law enforcement.
- » Remove law enforcement from trains and replace them with unarmed community-based "transit ambassadors" trained in de-escalation practices who can create a welcoming and safe space and assist passengers and transit drivers.
- » Develop public service announcements and communications campaigns that provide clear public health guidance centered on care for one another, not criminalization or policing the sick.
- » Suspend fares.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- » *'We Are Not Essential. We Are Sacrificial.'* By Sujatha Gidla
- » *The MTA meeting that some feared might come to blows* By Dana Rubinstein
- » *Building a Movement for #PeoplesTransit* By ACT-LA

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