

**WRITTEN STATEMENT OF
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**BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHWAYS AND TRANSIT**

“America Builds: A Review of Our Nation’s Transit Policies and Programs”

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On behalf of the Transportation Trades Department, AFL-CIO (TTD), and our 37 affiliated unions, I thank Chairman Rouzer, Ranking Member Norton, and Members of the Subcommittee on Highways and Transit for inviting me to testify before the Subcommittee today.

Our nation's public transit infrastructure stands at a pivotal moment that will define its future for generations. While we've made significant investments in physical assets, we have systematically neglected the most essential component of any transit system: the workers who make it function. Today, these frontline professionals face an unprecedented convergence of threats—from physical assaults that have risen 152% in less than a decade, to destabilizing fiscal cliffs that threaten service reliability, to a technological revolution being deployed without adequate safety frameworks, to an administration openly hostile to their right to organize. Each challenge targets a different aspect of transit workers' ability to deliver the service Americans depend on.

What links these seemingly disparate issues is a dangerous shift away from viewing public transportation as a public good. When operators are attacked without consequence, when funding prioritizes capital projects while neglecting sustainable operations, when autonomous vehicles are deployed without human oversight, and when contracted services replace union jobs with gig work—we're witnessing the same fundamental problem in different forms. Private interests and short-term thinking are systematically undermining transit systems designed to serve the public equitably and reliably. The push to privatize benefits, socialize costs, and minimize the role of workers comes from the same ideological playbook, whether it's deployed by Silicon Valley entrepreneurs promising technological salvation or politicians seeking to weaken labor protections in the name of efficiency.

The members of TTD's affiliated unions aren't just employees—they're guardians of a public trust. They're not opposed to innovation or fiscal responsibility, but they recognize that genuine progress must include, not exclude, the workforce that makes transit possible. As Congress prepares to craft the next surface transportation reauthorization, it faces a fundamental choice: continue treating workers as an afterthought—mere inputs to be optimized away—or recognize them as essential partners in building a transit system worthy of America's future. The testimony I present today makes an unequivocal case for the latter, offering concrete policies that protect workers while enhancing service for the traveling public—because these goals are fundamentally inseparable.

The Human Cost of Transit Violence: Protecting Workers and Passengers

In rural counties, suburban neighborhoods, and urban centers alike, transit provides essential mobility that powers local economies and creates pathways to opportunity. Yet the dedicated professionals who operate these systems face unprecedented challenges. Every day, transit operators across America face the threat of violence simply for doing their jobs. In Seattle this January, bus driver Shawn Yim was murdered by a passenger after a dispute over an open window escalated to needless violence. A Madison, WI woman endangered herself and her fellow passengers when her pushing and shoving of the driver caused the entire bus to crash just a few weeks ago. In Los Angeles, a series of violent attacks against bus drivers prompted Metro to take emergency action in 2024 to install protective barriers across its entire 2,000+ bus fleet. These aren't isolated incidents—they represent a systemic crisis in transit worker safety that directly threatens the public transportation system all Americans rely on.

Alarming, many perpetrators are able to flee from the scene of this crime, and prosecutors are therefore unable to stop them, or even ban them from future use of public transportation service. Therefore, we must work proactively to mitigate transit operators' exposure. It's well past time that we redesign the bus operator workstation, and we implore this Committee to get to work on legislation that would do just that.

For well over a decade, transportation labor advocates have sounded the alarm to federal policymakers over this epidemic of reprehensible assaults on public transit workers including bus operators, subway operators, and commuter rail workers. Data collected through the National Transit Database indicates an astonishing rise in the number of assault-related injuries on public transit in the U.S., a documented increase of 232% from 2014 through 2024, and a tripling of events resulting in fatality or injury requiring medical transport between 2008 and 2022. TTD applauds the IIJA's requirement effective since 2023 forcing transit agencies to report all assaults, not just ones that resulted in a fatality or an ambulance transport. Behind these statistics are real people—professionals who have been stabbed, shot, struck with objects, burned with hot coffee, doused with bodily fluids, and sexually assaulted while serving the public. When transit operators are attacked, everyone's safety is compromised—passengers, pedestrians, and other road users all face immediate danger.

Transit operator unions successfully fought for the inclusion of language to address the transit worker safety crisis in the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act of 2015. This language required the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to publish a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) that established minimum safety standards to protect operators from assault. FTA was specifically required to review and assess the need for bus safety standards, practices, and protocols as they relate to bus design with the goal of protecting bus operators from assault to inform the NPRM. To date, no rule has been implemented, despite repeated calls from labor unions and Congress to do so. This Committee must finish the job by mandating minimum vehicle design safety standards for transit vehicles.

Fortunately, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) provided the opportunity for another bite at the apple, and we are pleased to see the first fruits of that labor come to pass recently from the Federal Transit Administration. Among the most significant actions is a final rule requiring

transit agencies to establish joint labor-management Safety Committees as part of their Public Transportation Agency Safety Plans (PTASP). These committees are tasked with conducting safety risk assessments and developing strategies to mitigate risks associated with transit worker assaults.

Last fall, the Federal Transit Administration built upon the foundation of the PTASP rule when it published its first-ever *General Directive 24:1; Required Actions Regarding Assaults on Transit Workers*, bringing real teeth to the provisions labor fought for in the IIJA. Every agency that is subject to PTASP is now required to perform several actions addressing safety in their systems or risk a potential loss of federal funding. The General Directive now requires agencies to conduct risk assessments of assaults on their transit workers using the Safety Management System processes outlined in their Agency Safety Plans; identify strategies to mitigate risk and improve transit worker safety; comply with PTASP requirements to involve the joint labor-management Safety Committee when identifying risk mitigation strategies; and promptly provide information to FTA on the risk level identified in its system, how it is mitigating that risk, and how it is monitoring that risk. FTA's analysis of the first data set stemming from this General Directive noted that its findings could support the development of "federal minimum safety standards" for bus design. This kind of policy assessment informed by workers and their advocates on the ground is exactly what unions have been fighting for.

We thank the more than 200 members of Congress—including Democrats and Republicans on this Committee and current FTA nominee Marc Molinaro—who co-sponsored the legislation ultimately included in the IIJA and later pressed the FTA to take action. While we applaud this progress, much work remains to be done.

Although meaningful efforts are underway across many transit systems to separate out the risky task of fare collection, provide de-escalation training to transit operators, and address systemic causes of violent outbursts on public transportation, our members are in serious need of physical barriers that fully enclose the operator's workstation, protecting them from unruly passengers. Such barriers must prevent the unwanted entry of persons, fluids, and objects; and they must also provide for positive airflow, which better protects operators from exposure to viruses and other airborne pathogens. Given their truly essential work and the lessons learned from the covid-19 pandemic, this should be a given.

We call on FTA to promulgate a rule requiring strong minimum safety standards for public transit vehicles. We look forward to working with members of the committee to ensure FTA acts quickly to provide improved transit safety to workers and passengers.

Congress must ensure long-term financial stability for public transportation

This Spring marks five years since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and unfortunately, public transit systems are still bearing the scars from this challenging time. After falling to 20% of pre-pandemic levels, ridership has continued in a steady climb, recovering to 85% of pre-pandemic levels by March 1, 2025¹.

¹ <https://transitapp.com/APTA>

Although bus ridership has rebounded faster, commuter rail ridership is recovering more gradually around the country with some notable success in Boston's MBTA, which has nearly recovered all of its pre-pandemic ridership. Many other commuter rail systems across the country are experiencing year-on-year increases to their ridership levels and examining changes in their strategies for boosting ridership and revenues. Several states are also stepping up to the plate, providing additional transit funding to address the fiscal cliff, but they still need the federal government to provide additional funding.

With various large employers and the federal government implementing Return to Office mandates, we can reasonably expect ridership to continue to rise. Despite this positive indication of the traveling public's regard for the value of public transportation, transit agencies across the country are facing a potentially devastating fiscal cliff that if unaddressed could wind back their progress and hamstringing their ability to address other needs within their systems, like serious mitigation of assaults on transit operators.

Given the upcoming surface transportation reauthorization, this Congress has an important opportunity to address federal policy flaws that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed, like the prioritizing of capital investment over operating expense support, which in turn incentivizes transit agencies to direct their revenues to matching federal capital investments (more federal dollars are available to match capital expenses and they match at higher rates than operating expenses) rather than making urgently needed improvements to their systems. This skewed financial strategy is misguided, and not effective in improving transit systems holistically. The associated bureaucratic requirements that large urban agencies maintain two sets of accounts for their two separate sets of expenses is needlessly onerous as well.

The consequent operational funding shortfalls lead to reduced service frequency, increased fares, and a diminished ability to meet the mobility needs of their communities. This misalignment of federal support and incentives ultimately leads us to many of the challenges public transit systems face today.

It's especially worth noting that the federal prohibition on funding transit operations is also fueling public safety crises in many transit systems. Policing, monitoring security cameras, installing physical barriers that prevent assaults, and many other vital components of a secure environment all must be paid for exclusively out of local funds. TTD also supports ensuring that federal funding is eligible to be spent on transit ambassadors, personnel that are empowered to supply fare enforcement and provide important monitoring ability as crime and safety issues develop. Considering that the presence of uniformed law enforcement personnel is the most effective strategy for reducing violence in public transit, the federal restriction against operations funding essentially ties one arm behind our agencies' backs. As persistent concerns about violence in our transit systems continues to slow ridership recovery, ending this arbitrary ban on operations funding would immediately raise both the level of safety in the systems, as well as fare box revenue as riders regain confidence in these systems.

We learned a valuable lesson about the benefits of funding flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic when Congress temporarily allowed agencies to use all federal formula funds –not just emergency funds– awarded from 2020 to 2022 for operations. A boon to our nation’s public transportation systems, this flexibility ensured that essential workers in public transit were able to continue doing their jobs and delivering service during the pandemic, in turn allowing their passengers to continue doing their essential work and providing valuable service to our communities and our economy. Now, years later, federal transportation funding policies put us right back where we started.

Public transit systems provide widespread benefits that transcend local boundaries and fundamentally support national economic, environmental, and social goals. Congress must not treat public transportation as a solely local issue, as effective transit can have a multiplier effect on economic productivity and growth. Not to mention, they are the absolute lifeline to school, work, places of worship, and medical care for citizens without the funds or ability to own a car. Transit systems that have the long term viability and federal support to absorb unexpected shocks and challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic are as invaluable to our national economic interests as they are to the social fabric of the communities they serve. Congress must treat public transit as the critical component of our national infrastructure that it is.

That is why transportation labor has long supported a reversal of the status quo, restoring the federal government’s critical role in supporting sustainable and reliable public transportation service by providing transit agencies with new, dedicated funding and flexibility to use portions of their capital budgets for operating costs. Fortunately, there are leaders in Congress who understand this and have introduced a legislative solution addressing just that. Subcommittee member Hank Johnson, introduced H.R. 7039, the Stronger Communities Through Better Transit Act, last Congress, which would significantly enhance public transit service nationwide by providing \$20 billion per year for four years for operations funding. This would enable transit agencies to increase service frequency, expand service areas, and extend operating hours, thus improving accountability and convenience for passengers. The model provided in this bill directly addresses the operational shortfalls and skewed incentives created by our current federal funding framework. Transportation labor also applauds Senators Chris Van Hollen and John Fetterman for their similar legislation, the Moving Transit Forward Act of 2024. TTD and our affiliates very much look forward to working with Congress to move these bills forward and ensure the long-term success and sustainability of our public transit systems.

Transit labor implores the Subcommittee to build on transit workforce development measures in any surface transportation reauthorization legislation as well. Since the labor-supported broader adoption of battery electric buses, the bus mechanic job has evolved to be more of a technician role, now including new skills like electric motor repair, computer literacy, diagnostic troubleshooting, and competency with select sophisticated software programs. On the operations side, new skills are needed as well to bring drivers and depot staff up to speed on managing electric buses. The IIJA successfully addressed this challenge by stipulating that 5% of Low or No (Lo-No) Emission Bus Competitive grant funds must be used by transit systems to fund workforce development. Now that this program has been put to the test, labor unions report that more resources are needed, and we support raising the workforce development set-aside to 10% of the grant. It’s also important that Congress work to officially recognize the Transit Workforce Center

(TWC) in Title 49 USC and ensure adequate funding so that transit systems across the country have high-quality curricula for training their workers.

Eroding transit labor protections is not a viable solution for improving transit service or addressing budget shortfalls

Strong labor protections are not a barrier to effective public transportation—they are essential to it. For over 50 years, transit labor protections have ensured that federal investments in transit systems do not come at the expense of the workers who operate, maintain, and power them. These protections uphold the basic principle that public dollars should strengthen communities, not erode the wages, rights, or working conditions of the very people delivering public services.

Attempts to scapegoat transit labor protections as the cause of budget challenges or inefficiencies are both misleading and deeply cynical. They present a false choice between protecting workers and improving service—when, in fact, the two go hand in hand. Stable, well-supported workforces are the foundation of safe, reliable, and resilient transit systems.

Far from obstructing progress, these protections have supported it. Reports from the Government Accountability Office² and others have shown that transit labor protections have had minimal impact on costs or the adoption of new technologies. Instead, it has fostered stronger labor-management relationships, reduced conflict, and provided a framework for negotiating necessary change. Transit agencies that invest in their workforce—not just in hardware—are better positioned to deliver consistent, high-quality service to the public.

And most importantly, union transit workers aren't just doing a job—they're building careers in public service. Whether it's a bus operator, station agent, mechanic, or dispatcher, these are skilled professionals who take pride in the work they do and the communities they serve. Because they have a long-term stake in the system, they become some of our most trusted sources of insight—raising red flags about safety issues, identifying inefficiencies, and offering practical solutions that only come from lived experience. Their institutional knowledge and daily presence on the front lines make them invaluable partners in improving service, maintaining public trust, and ensuring that transit systems operate safely and effectively.

At TTD, we believe the federal government has a responsibility to ensure its investments lift standards—not lower them. That principle applies across every mode of transportation and to every worker who keeps our systems running.

Efforts to overturn these protections under the guise of improving service by reducing labor costs are misguided and detract from the substantive policy discussions necessary to ensure the long-term success of this industry. It is imperative that Congress rejects any attempts to erode these vital protections based on outdated arguments that are grounded in a distaste for labor unions rather than sound policy and common sense. Instead, we should uphold the principles that have long supported a fair and equitable transit workforce.

² <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-02-78.pdf>

Transit operator jobs have long been a pathway to the middle class for hard-working and public-service oriented professionals who love to interact with and serve their communities while they earn an honest living that can sustain themselves and their families. Transit labor protections are an essential part of how the profession came to be known this way, and are integral to the continued success of this profession as well.

IJJA wins lead to promising opportunities in surface transportation reauthorization

This Congress will be an exciting one for transportation policy, as Members, stakeholders, and transportation policy experts go back to the drawing board to craft the next surface transportation reauthorization. Before doing so, I want to take a look back at all that was accomplished for our nation's transit policies and programs through the IJJA.

Prior to the passage of the IJJA, TTD and our affiliated unions had called for transportation infrastructure investments of the scale that this legislation delivered for decades. We would be remiss if we did not applaud President Biden and the leaders in Congress who put partisanship aside and showed Americans that we can all still work together. I hope that together we can accomplish a similar feat, in the same bipartisan fashion, with this next surface reauthorization.

The efforts of transportation labor advocates and partners in Congress secured provisions in the IJJA that now statutorily require FTA to collect accurate data on transit workforce assaults, reform its PTASP process to include valuable worker voices and incorporate measures to reduce the risk of assault in every transit system, and to update its national safety plan to address the risk of assault and other public health concerns. The IJJA also ensured that major new investments in zero emission transit were paired with workforce training policies to ensure both the incumbent and future workforce have the necessary skills to maintain complex electrical equipment. We hope that this approach will serve as a model for the responsible deployment of other technological changes in transit systems in the future. Beyond the bounds of transit service, the IJJA made financial investments in transportation infrastructure that are reflective of the fact that efficient movement of people and goods across America requires a seamless, multimodal network. The IJJA ensured the expansion of this network was done so in a way that upholds high-road wages and labor standards for those that lay track, pour concrete, reinforce bridges, and install electrical equipment. It also ensured that as many materials and rolling stock acquisitions as possible were made in America with its Buy America provisions. TTD will always work to ensure that the power of the federal purse never works to undermine workers in their own communities.

These IJJA accomplishments give Congress much to build on going forward, although much still remains to be done. TTD and its affiliates call for a surface transportation reauthorization that provides for the widespread retrofitting of buses to include physical barriers that protect drivers from bodily harm, whether it strikes in the form of a fist, bodily fluid, or physical object. We call for reauthorization legislation that seriously addresses funding challenges for transit agencies by providing funding flexibility and operating assistance. We also call on Congress to ensure that qualified, certified, operators be present on all vehicles used for public transportation, including vehicles that claim autonomous driving capabilities. The federal government must ensure that any new technologies onboard public transportation equipment meet existing safety and operational standards.

Deployment of AV technology

The deployment of automated vehicle (AV) technology in public transportation—absent a clear, enforceable federal framework—poses a significant risk not only to public safety but to the workforce that keeps our transit systems running. Without federal guardrails, we are witnessing a growing patchwork of state regulations, pilot projects, and private vendor practices that threaten to undermine labor protections, reduce service quality, and endanger passengers and workers alike. We’ve already seen examples of AV shuttles deployed with no human onboard, operated by third-party contractors with little or no training. This is not innovation—it’s deregulation.

Transit labor has never been anti-technology. What we oppose is a model of automation that treats workers as disposable, bypasses established safety protocols, and turns public transportation into a live experiment conducted at the expense of working people, pedestrians, road users, and some of the most vulnerable populations these companies claim will benefit but who unwittingly have become guinea pigs in service to testing unproven tech in real time. We strongly support policies that regulate AV deployment in transit by requiring certified operators to be onboard with the ability to assume control when necessary. At a minimum, any agency receiving federal funds for automated vehicles should be required to submit a comprehensive workforce development plan—ensuring that frontline transit workers are not replaced, but retrained, upskilled, and meaningfully integrated into the evolving transit ecosystem should these technologies one day prove themselves safe to operate.

Congress has a central role to play in shaping the future of automation in transit. It is not enough to passively monitor this technology’s emergence—a level of oversight that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is abjectly failing to provide, despite urgent calls from nearly 30 transportation unions and even the National Transportation Safety Board to take action. What we need is a proactive, worker-centered regulatory framework with enforceable standards, and that will require this committee’s commitment to safety and to the workers back home in your districts. That means directing the Federal Transit Administration to use its authority to issue binding rules governing how AVs are deployed in public transit systems. A federal safety framework cannot be optional or advisory. Without clear direction from this Committee and the full Congress, we risk letting technology outpace the rules meant to keep riders and workers safe.

We must require the Federal Transit Administration to establish binding minimum safety standards for the deployment of automated transit vehicles, and it must do so now—before experimentation becomes normalization. These standards must include requirements for operator presence, physical workstation protections, and full compliance with all existing drug and alcohol testing rules. Safety cannot be left to the discretion of vendors or negotiated piecemeal in local pilot programs. This is especially urgent as some AV deployments have moved forward with temporary waivers or exemptions from core transit safety rules—an unacceptable trend that Congress must halt. FTA already has a statutory safety mandate; it must use it to ensure that public dollars fund public goods—not unsafe, unregulated alternatives.

Equally important is the need to prevent the misuse of federal transit funding to support unregulated, third-party-operated microtransit services that undermine public transit systems and the union workforce that operates them. We align ourselves with our affiliated unions, who are

unified in calling for strict federal limits on these services: they must start or end at existing transit hubs; they must fully comply with all FTA safety and labor requirements, including drug and alcohol testing; and they must not duplicate existing fixed-route service or accrue deadhead miles on the public dime. Federal dollars must never be used to subsidize the erosion of worker protections or the outsourcing of core transit functions to the lowest bidder. If microtransit is to play a role in the future of mobility, it must supplement—not replace—public transit, and it must be held to the same standards. Anything less risks turning public transportation into a fragmented, unaccountable gig economy.

Congress should use its oversight authority to ensure a fully functioning FTA

As America's largest transportation labor federation representing thousands of federal workers, we must take a moment to comment on the new administration's brazen and unconsidered actions towards the federal workforce.

To be absolutely clear: Forcing the Federal Transit Administration to abruptly scale back its staff—especially amid an unprecedented volume of active, high-stakes projects—would be deeply damaging to the public interest. FTA's workforce includes experienced professionals who don't just administer grant programs; they serve as long-term stewards of public investment. Like unionized transit workers on the frontlines, these career staff are deeply invested in the success, safety, and integrity of the systems they support. They know how to spot problems before they derail a project, how to navigate complex local conditions, and how to help agencies design programs that are equitable, efficient, and durable. Gutting that institutional capacity risks leaving billions in critical infrastructure funding stranded and hundreds of transit projects stuck in limbo—not because communities failed to plan, but because Washington chose to pull expertise off the field at the exact moment it was needed most.

Should recent trends regarding the White House's approach to federal workers' collective bargaining rights be extended to FTA employees, I urge you to keep in mind that federal employees already abide by strict collective bargaining terms, and forfeit many of the rights that private sector employees maintain, including wage and benefit negotiations and the right to strike. The Trump Administration's recent actions in gutting multiple federal labor relations institutions leave these workers powerless to employer retaliation and unfair labor practices. Without the career public servants and their collective expertise built from years of experience in office to implement your legislation and directions, this Subcommittee's authority becomes effectively neutered.

TTD believes in the value each of you bring to this Subcommittee, we believe in the value of bipartisan and bicameral work in Congress, we believe in the good intentions and expertise of your staff, and we believe in the checks and balances Congress and the Executive Branch impose on one another. Just as we implore you to believe in the insights of frontline workers as the eyes and ears of our transportation system, we insist that you believe in the value and expertise of federal employees, and in their rights to bargain collectively.