

Late to Work? Thank the Transit Union

A labor group in New York blocks a common-sense schedule update.

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A conductor on a subway train in New York

PHOTO: JEENAH MOON/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Many factors contribute to awful city governance, but public unions keep reminding everyone that they're number one. In the latest example, New York City's transit union blocked a plan that would have improved commutes and saved the city money without costing union workers a dime.

An arbitrator on Tuesday settled the dispute between the local Transport Workers Union (TWU) and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), according to Crain's New York Business. The decision in the union's favor blocks changes to subway schedules that the MTA announced in December, which were meant to cut costs and match service with riders' needs.

In a transit system burdened by decades of mismanagement, the new proposal had the refreshing sound of common sense. The MTA wanted to cut the number of trains it runs on Mondays and Fridays, the most common weekdays for working from home. It had data in support: Last autumn the agency tallied average ridership at about 280,000 for Friday morning rush hours, compared with 380,000 on Thursdays. In return, it would have run more trains on weekends and the busier weekdays to cut down wait times.

But the TWU said no thanks. Its complaint wasn't that workers faced longer hours or less pay, since the MTA planned only to shift service around. Rather, the idea of workers' changing their shift schedules was too much to bear. Richard Davis, head of the local TWU, said adapting to new hours would be "chaotic and problematic." Imagine the union having to adapt like everyone else to a world changed by the pandemic. Can't have that.

Efficiency was the main motivation for the canceled reform, but the MTA also estimates it would have saved about \$1.5 million a year. That's not much for an agency with an operating deficit of \$600 million. But it should be saving money where it can, with no full rebound in ridership likely and only a modest fare hike planned in coming years.

Instead, subway riders can expect service to worsen as costs keep going up. As long as the union has a veto, improving commutes will take the back seat.

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