

## **Statement of Brian Pollitt, President Transport Workers Union, Local 234**

### **City and SEPTA police need to establish an overwhelming presence in the subway to combat transit crime**

Crime and violence in big city public transit systems is on the rise across the country, from New York, to Chicago to Washington, Los Angeles, Atlanta, the San Francisco Bay Area and Philadelphia. The increase in crime is caused, in part, by the pandemic, but also due to opioid addiction and rising levels of homelessness.

In Philadelphia, subway crime has been on the rise. In 2021, there were 86 aggravated assaults compared to 46 in 2019. Robberies increased to 217 from 118 during the same period. The problem is making it hard to get riders back on the SEPTA system. .

Over the past two and a half years, Local 234 members have kept SEPTA and the City moving in the face of two public health crises, COVID-19 and Opioid Addiction. During the pandemic, there has been fewer riders but a marked increase in hostility directed against our operators, over fares and masking. There has also been an increase in the number of homeless and drug addicted individuals seeking refuge in the subway and in SEPTA terminals and vehicles. Trains at the terminal points of the Broad Street and Market-Frankford lines have become hotels for the homeless. TWU members, operators, cashiers and maintenance employees are being threatened, assaulted and otherwise accosted while trying to perform their jobs.

These same security concerns are impacting SEPTA riders and making it difficult for the Authority to restore ridership beyond pre-pandemic levels—let alone increase ridership---critical to the recovery of the Philadelphia and Commonwealth economies. Unfortunately, due to either

the lack of effective strategies, resources, or training, the SEPTA Transit Police have been unable to address rising transit crime.

SEPTA needs to do more to solve the problem of transit crime---especially as it relates to the deployment of the transit police force. Although the transit police are short-handed by approximately 50 officers, the existing force can, but isn't, doing enough to address criminal activity in the system; activity that Transit Police *management* is fully aware. For example:

- On the Walnut-Locust concourse of the Broad Street line a gang is operating with impunity, openly dealing drugs, promoting prostitution and scaring the hell out of our members and the riding public. They're acting as if they own the location. SEPTA management knows what's going on, the Transit Police know what's going on, our members have reported the problem but the transit police appear to be looking the other way. No one has challenged the groups' operation in the subway!

- At the Frankford train and bus terminal in Northeast Philadelphia, homeless people and opioid users congregate on a daily basis using this SEPTA facility as if it's their home. During day time they hang out on the platform, from midnight to 5:00 a.m. they use SEPTA buses as mobile homes. They sleep, eat, and relieve themselves on SEPTA buses and trains. They also use and sell drugs. The same phenomena is occurring at the 69<sup>th</sup> Street terminal. On the Broad Street line a homeless *encampment* has been set up between Walnut Locust and City Hall.

The transit police patrol by car, foot or mobile cart to keep passengers and employees safe and secure on the SEPTA system. But, to date, these patrol units have been unable to address these problems. Why? This is not simply a matter of being short-handed of transit police officers, although that's a real problem that SEPTA must address. Instead, the ongoing

nature of the problems of homelessness, drug addiction and crime *in the subway* demonstrates a *lack of will* on the part of Chief Thomas Nestel, the head of the Transit Police, and top SEPTA management, to deploy the resources SEPTA has to drive crime out of the system. Perhaps SEPTA and the City Administration have decided that homeless encampments in the subway are the lesser of evils, that is, out of sight, out of mind; so long as the problem remains underground. If so, our transit system will never recover from the loss of ridership it experienced during the pandemic.

The TWU recognizes that transit crime is the product of a broader trend of rising crime and in the City. In 2021, there were over 2,000 victims of gun violence in Philadelphia and over 500 gun related deaths, a record. Our schools are being undermined by the proliferation of guns and the ever present threat of violence. Homelessness, opioid addiction and crime are not rooted in our transit system, but are citywide social problems that are *migrating to the subway*. Think about it this way, can we create a *safe haven* in the subway, while crime is running rampant in the City? No way!

Thus, enhanced security on SEPTA trains, buses and in the subway cannot be achieved in isolation from a concerted effort to address the underlying social problems that are outside of SEPTA's control. Accordingly, the Mayor, City Council and the State legislature need to develop policies and programs that deal with drug addiction, homelessness and crime. Moreover, if our elected officials expect SEPTA to do more, as they should, they must provide SEPTA with the resources to do so.

Public transit officials around the country recognize that more police alone cannot solve the problem of transit crime. As a result, transit agencies are employing other tactics to deal with the underlying social problems feeding rising crime rates.

In Atlanta, for example, MARTA initiated a program in which uniformed, unarmed security personnel help homeless people by directing them to shelters, counseling and treatment. SEPTA is trying a similar approach, but it's too early to say whether such tactics will produce tangible results. But here again, if SEPTA is going to successfully move the homeless population and opioid users out of the subway and off SEPTA buses, the City must provide safe shelters, professional counseling and effective drug treatment programs.

Taking firmer action against fare evasion is another tack, since fare evaders often engage in other criminal activity. However, this problem is, in part, the product of poor Philadelphians who desperately need to use public transit being priced out of the system, especially if they need a transfer to get to and from their final destinations. If fare evaders are going to be channeled into the criminal justice system, we cannot have poor, working class Philadelphians get swept up in the process. SEPTA needs to make transit more accessible to those who cannot afford its sky high fares.

There is no quick fix to the problem of transit crime, because it is not as easy problem to solve. However, since *the City's social problems* have migrated into the subway, it would be a good start for the City Police and the SEPTA Police to establish an overwhelming law enforcement presence in the subway, even if temporary, to relocate the problem back into the City at large.

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