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New Report: Investments in public transit workforce are needed to boost economic opportunity and racial equity

DENVER — A new report released today by the Alliance for a Just Society, the Labor Network for Sustainability, and TransitCenter shows how inadequate investments in our public transit workforce have resulted in reduced transit service in cities, including the Denver metro area, across the country. Investments in the public transit workforce are urgently needed to boost economic opportunity and racial equity in our communities.

The report, released on Transit Equity Day, notes how inadequate investments in job quality, the aging transit workforce, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have reduced transit staffing levels, and left many public transit systems unable to meet the needs of the communities they serve. In Denver, a need for public transit workers has already led to cuts to Regional Transportation District service, leaving Denverites unable to get to where they need to go.

“Denverites rely on public transit every day to get to work, school, the grocery store, or wherever it is they need to go,” says Molly McKinley, Policy Director for the Denver Streets Partnership. “People who need access to public transit the most are experiencing service cuts because we don’t have a sufficient workforce to ensure that our buses and trains are running reliably and safely. We must invest in public transit, including our public transit workforce, if we want to build an economically resilient and racially equitable Denver. We urge our local leaders to use the federal investment from the recently enacted Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and adopt policies that prioritize recruitment and retention of a strong workforce to address this growing crisis”

Lance Longenbohn, President of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1001, says “Public transit workers are the backbone of our community. Because of their hard work and dedication people across the Denver metro region have access to opportunities, services, and loved ones. RTD must prioritize policies, like those outlined in this report, that help recruit and retain transit workers.”
“It is crucial that RTD work with the transit workers union and community stakeholders to guide workforce investments and ensure that transit workers have what they need to ensure our public transit system can operate efficiently, safely, and reliably.” Dennis Dougherty, Executive Director of the Colorado AFL-CIO, says.

“Public transit is critical to reducing pollution in our region, addressing our air quality crisis, and meeting the needs of communities of color and folks living on lower incomes.” Jenny Gaeng, Transportation Advocate of Conservation Colorado, says. “Policies that emphasize equity and improve job quality, safety, and security for transit workers are key to building a thriving public transit system.”

The report also highlights that transit cuts due to lack of investment in the transit workforce fall most heavily on working people, and people of color in particular. “Black people across the country are more likely than white people to count on buses, trains, and other forms of public transit as their primary transportation option, and are more likely to use public transportation to get to work. Investments in public transit thus contribute to economic opportunity for Black and brown working people,” according to the report.

It also includes recommendations to help transit agencies, like Denver’s Regional Transportation District, rebuild a strong transit workforce in communities across the country. The report emphasizes that the starting point to addressing any workforce problem is to engage in a dialogue with transit employees themselves, through their democratically elected union representatives, as well as riders and other community stakeholders. Operators, maintenance employees, and other transit workers know better than anyone how to improve job quality in order to hire and retain a skilled, stable and professional transit workforce. Labor-management negotiations can forge the most appropriate policy solutions to providing safe and healthy environments for transit workers; improving their working conditions; expanding access to good transit jobs; and ensuring workers have the skills and training needed to adapt to modernization efforts like electrification.

Read the full report here, including detailed recommendations for building a stable, skilled, and experienced public transit workforce.

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About the Denver Streets Partnership
The Denver Streets Partnership is a coalition of community organizations advocating for people-friendly streets in Denver. Our mission is to reclaim Denver’s streets for people walking, rolling, biking, and using transit, and to build safe, healthy, and equitable communities. Learn
more at https://denverstreetspartnership.org/ and follow us on Facebook @DenverStreetsPartnership and Twitter @BikeWalkBus.