

No Bus Cuts Denton Invites You to Join the Coalition Against Predatory Microtransit

Predatory Microtransit is the harmful replacement of public fixed-route bus service and unionized workers with outsourced corporate “on-demand” rides in smaller vehicles driven by workers classified as “independent contractors.” It is the most destructive form of the privatization of public transportation by ride-hailing companies and unscrupulous government officials.¹ As a result of Predatory Microtransit, bus drivers and mechanics can lose jobs, and their transit unions lose power; low-income riders lose access to transportation; and the communities of which they all are a part lose wealth.

Because of Predatory Microtransit, there is less (or sometimes no) work for drivers and mechanics, and transit unions are weakened by a drop in dues revenue and a loss of “market share” to corporations employing workers (mis)classified as independent contractors. Also, low-income riders (among whom people from protected classes are overrepresented) are left without transportation because of their lack of access to the phone, minutes, data, or credit card that are needed to book an “on-demand” ride. Finally, whole communities suffer financially because drivers of the corporate “on-demand” vehicles make less money and receive fewer benefits than do public agency bus drivers; an increase in collisions and calls for service from public safety agencies accompanies the introduction of Predatory Microtransit;² and public funds are siphoned off into the bank accounts of corporate executives and shareholders in other locations.

An example of Predatory Microtransit is the on-going attempt by the Denton County Transportation Authority (DCTA) in North Texas to replace its eight public bus routes (and its bus drivers organized in ATU Local 1338) with a contract with the Via corporation for “on-demand” rides in minivans and other small vehicles that the DCTA calls GoZone. Denton Worker, a grassroots worker organization that includes members of ATU Local 1338, is fighting back through its No Bus Cuts Denton campaign.³ Initial research has uncovered several additional apparent examples of Predatory Microtransit affecting other ATU locals: Local 788 (Metro Transit’s Via Metro STL), Local 587 (King County Transit’s Via to Transit), Local 22 (Worcester Regional Transit Authority’s Via WRTA), and Local 1564 (Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation’s SMART Flex).

Although Predatory Microtransit is a powerful global foe,⁴ it can be defeated locally. Some transit union locals have been able to fight it off through effective organizing – resulting in

¹ See “The Costs of Doing Business,” a 2019 publication by the Transportation Trades Department of the AFL-CIO (<https://ttd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/THE-COST-OF-DOING-BUSINESS-Why-lawmakers-must-hold-the-ride-hailing-industry-accountable-TTD-report.pdf>), accessed May 4, 2022).

² See the safety research by the No Bus Cuts Denton campaign on the introduction of Via’s GoZone: <https://nobuscutsdenton.org/documents/>, accessed May 3, 2022.

³ See NoBusCutsDenton.org and @NoBusCutsDenton on Facebook and Twitter. Media coverage includes https://dentonrc.com/news/insight_denton/insight-denton-whos-at-the-helm-of-no-bus-cuts-denton/article_a2530ccb-27fc-5dcb-af36-1a29ffe3c3c9.html and <https://labornotes.org/blogs/2022/03/texas-union-activists-fight-microtransit-privatization>.

⁴ ATU Local 113 in Toronto, Canada is threatened by Predatory Microtransit, as well: https://issuu.com/atucomm/docs/q4-it2020_web, accessed May 3, 2022.

public transit agencies bringing microtransit services “in-house.” Apparent examples of this successful defense by ATU locals include ATU Local 1091 in Austin, Texas (Capital Metro’s Pickup) and ATU Local 256 in Sacramento, California (Sacramento Regional Transit District’s SmaRT Ride). Locals of other transit unions that appear to have also successfully fought off Predatory Microtransit include Teamsters Local 533 in Reno, Nevada (RTC Washoe’s FlexRIDE); SMART in Los Angeles, California (LA Metro’s Metro Micro); and Transport Workers Union Local 208 in Columbus, Ohio (COTA’s COTA/Plus).

Predatory Microtransit has been facilitated by funding from the Department of Transportation’s Federal Transit Administration (FTA). The FTA “primed the pump” for Predatory Microtransit in 2016 by spending \$8 million on eleven projects nationwide that funded projects involving ride-hailing companies like Uber and Via.⁵ In 2020, it continued to enable Predatory Microtransit by providing \$250,000 to “[t]he City of Wilson in rural central North Carolina [...] to replace its fixed-route transit service with on-demand, rural microtransit.”⁶ By continuing to feed Predatory Microtransit corporations like Via, Uber, and Lyft, the FTA will undermine the Biden administration’s priorities of protecting union jobs and ensuring racial equity.

The No Bus Cuts Denton campaign invites transit unions, transit rider groups, civil rights organizations, and other interested parties to join together to form a Coalition Against Predatory Microtransit, so that we can collectively demand the following of three federal agencies. First, the Department of Transportation (and its FTA) must immediately “turn off the tap” to end the flow of funding to Predatory Microtransit projects; promptly investigate the DCTA’s attempt to replace its bus routes with Via’s GoZone (funding for fixed-route bus service is guaranteed only through September, 2022); and scrutinize the FTA’s past and current funded projects to ensure that these have not facilitated Predatory Microtransit. Second, the Department of Labor must investigate both the microtransit projects that the FTA has funded *and* the transit agencies that receive federal funding and have implemented non-FTA funded microtransit programs for violations of the transit labor protections in Section 13(c) of the Federal Transit Act. Third, the Department of Justice must investigate these same projects and agencies for violations of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.

A united group *can* defeat a predator. Our proposed Coalition Against Predatory Microtransit could save transit union jobs; preserve access to public transportation for people with low incomes; and strengthen local economies in Denton County, Texas, across the United States and Canada, and wherever else around the globe that Predatory Microtransit is taking place. Please join us.

In solidarity,
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⁵ <https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/2020-05/FTA-Report-No.-0164.pdf>, p. 1. See also the historical narrative in <https://ttd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/THE-COST-OF-DOING-BUSINESS-Why-lawmakers-must-hold-the-ride-hailing-industry-accountable-TTD-report.pdf>, p. 3.

⁶ <https://www.transit.dot.gov/research-innovation/fy20-accelerating-innovative-mobility-aim-project-selections>, accessed May 3, 2022.