

Delays in transit service continue as repairs begin on New York's Penn Station

By Alan Whyte
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Scheduled emergency repair work began Monday at Penn Station in New York City, the busiest train station in the United States, causing major delays and disruptions to the area's already beleaguered transportation network, and difficulties for the 600,000 passengers who use Penn Station daily.

While no accidents were reported, delays were significant. Long Island Railroad (LIRR) trains were rerouted in some cases to the already overcrowded subway lines, such as the 7 train, one of the main lines for the borough of Queens.

The chairman of the state-run Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), which operates the LIRR, Joseph Lhota, provoked outrage when he suggested that riders could avoid delays by simply leaving earlier for work, "or later, if your job allows it."

The repairs take place in the shadow of the third life-threatening incident at the station in four months.

On Thursday, close to 9:00 p.m., the front wheels on the first car of a New Jersey Transit train went off the rails as it was entering Penn Station. Fortunately, no injuries were reported, but about 180 passengers and crew members were stuck on the train for over 90 minutes until a rescue train transferred them to the station. New Jersey Transit service was disrupted for more than two and a half hours.

In late March, an Amtrak train sideswiped a New Jersey Transit train. Although the incident caused no injuries it did shut down the station for most of the day. In early April, a New Jersey Transit train derailed, injuring five people. In that incident, travel to and from Hoboken, New Jersey was disrupted for several days.

In addition, in the New York City subway system, for which Penn Station is a major transfer point, on June 27 a train derailed and struck a tunnel wall. In this incident, 39 passengers were injured and about 800 walked off the train onto the track in a desperate attempt to escape smoke that made breathing difficult.

On Sunday, it was reported that an MTA work train in the subway, which does not carry passengers, derailed three times in Brooklyn. One source told the media, "The MTA knows this train has an issue and they sent it out to the main line anyway."

The cause of the latest accident in Penn Station is being investigated, but it has already been determined that the train engineer was operating within the prescribed 15 miles per hour speed limit.

The repairs to the station will reduce service so severely that it has been called "a summer of hell" by the Governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo. Because of years of neglect, the repairs will be ongoing 24 hours a day for seven days a week for eight weeks, and are expected to reduce service by 20 to 25 percent.

The aging station is used by Amtrak, the federal commuter railroad which owns it, as well as by New Jersey Transit and the Long Island Rail Road. The station was first built in 1910, but the original structure was leveled in 1963 so that Madison Square Garden could be built on top of it.

The eight-week repair schedule in Penn Station, from July 10 to September 1, is meant to deal only with track issues, and will not even address signal and power problems. The station will still be handling far more trains than it was ever designed to handle, running a round-the-clock schedule that makes it difficult to maintain and repair the infrastructure.

Many observers are skeptical about whether the very limited goals of the current repairs will be finished by September. Some have suggested that the delays will become the "new normal."

Amtrak says it has an \$11.6 billion backlog for basic infrastructure projects such as tracks, signals, electrical systems, etc., in addition to a \$26.5 billion backlog for other projects, including, for example, the building of a new tunnel from Washington, DC to Baltimore to replace

the current one that dates to the 1870s.

Amtrak has never been properly funded by Congress, which makes it impossible to plan and execute the necessary repairs, maintenance and rehabilitation projects. Trump's proposed budget plan will make matters even worse, since it calls for cuts of \$760 million in Amtrak's funding over the next decade.

One project designed to alleviate the problem in the northeast area is called the Gateway Program, which involves the building of a new Hudson River Tunnel and the overhaul of the 107-year North River Tunnel between New York and New Jersey, which was damaged by Hurricane Sandy in 2012. That tunnel has been rapidly deteriorating and has been suffering from overcrowding.

However, Trump's budget would eliminate funding for the New Starts infrastructure program, of which the Hudson River Gateway is part, over the next decade. Amtrak officials have estimated that without constructing a new tunnel and rehabilitating the old one tunnel, rail service in the area will be reduced by about 75 percent.

A report issued by the Federal Railroad Administration in 2014 concluded that the Northeast Corridor's connection between Washington DC and Boston, Amtrak's busiest line, plays such a vital role in the US economy that loss of service for just one day would cost the economy nearly \$100 million.

The MTA, which controls the LIRR, The Metro-North Railroad, the Staten Island Railroad and the New York City subway and bus systems, as well as several bridges and tunnels, is the largest transportation network in North America and has also been experiencing severe delays in service due to its aging and inadequate signal system, which is constantly breaking down, as well as old trains and overcrowding.

Decades of inadequate funding have saddled the MTA with \$40 billion in bond debt. Eighteen percent of the system's annual operating budget is earmarked to service this debt. It is expected that this percentage will increase along with the ever-growing debt.

This MTA's financial crunch has made its transit system both increasingly unreliable and dangerous. The transit agency is forcing both the passengers as well as the transit workers to pay for all this red ink, as the fare keeps rising every two years, and as the transit union cooperates in negotiating concession contracts against its members.

The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) has found that the New York City subways need at least \$68 billion over the next 20 years to maintain and improve service. The crisis in the northeast rail corridor is part of

an overall in crisis the country's infrastructure. According to the ASCE, it will take \$3.6 trillion to build and fix the nation's deteriorating infrastructure.

The decay of the New York area transit infrastructure not only threatens the lives of riders and transit workers; it is a looming economic disaster.

In a report issued yesterday by the Office of the City Comptroller, 74 percent of respondents to a survey about their experiences on mass transit recently said that they had been late to work in the last 90 days because of subway delays. Seventy percent reported that their trains were late at least half the time.

The poorest borough in the city, the Bronx, reported the highest percentage (54 percent) of riders experiencing regular delays, and those living in zip codes with the lowest incomes were 14 percent more likely to be reprimanded by a supervisor for tardiness due to late trains.

Media reports recently revealed that the MTA's executive board members, who get free passes to the system, rarely use them, preferring alternative forms of transportation that many New Yorkers cannot afford. The disparity between the working class and the wealthier layers of the population in access to safe and comfortable transportation is yet another expression of the growing inequality in all areas of social life.

The transit crisis is a growing threat to life and limb of working people, both those who operate the equipment, such as train crews and track workers, and to the riders who must use it. The capitalist system and its rulers have already inflicted such crimes on the working class as the Grenfell Tower fire in London and the poisoning of the water supply in Flint, Michigan. How long will it be before serious injury or loss of life occurs on the MTA or Amtrak because of a derailment or a malfunctioning signal?

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