

Why aren't trains evacuating people from the path of Hurricane Irma?

By Jeff Lusanne
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As Hurricane Irma threatens Florida with historic destruction, little to nothing is being done to help residents evacuate. On Friday, Florida Governor Rick Scott and FEMA officials warned millions of residents to flee the path of the storm. How to flee has been left up to residents, with no assistance provided.

Over 20 counties are being told to evacuate, in what could be the largest evacuation in American history. It is quickly exposing the abysmal, anarchy-filled state of transportation in America. Those hoping to fly out were confronted with sky-high prices, in the hundreds or thousands of dollars, and now over 4,000 flights have been canceled. Extra flights were added, but operations wound down Friday afternoon, more than a full day before the storm. Many have been left stranded at the airport, with all shelters filled up.

For millions, their only way to flee is by car. Gas shortages have spread across the state, and drivers confront extremely heavy traffic that burns through gas with little progress. From southern Florida, there is only Interstate 95 or Interstate 75 to head north, both of which have had extensive delays for days. On Friday, northbound delays covering hundreds of miles were visible on I-75 and I-95 even into Georgia and South Carolina.

This “fend for yourself” method of evacuation presents an enormous inequality, where working people must spend hundreds or thousands of dollars to head to safety, assuming they even have a car. As a retirement destination, Florida also has many residents over 65 years old. This includes residents in nursing care, or with physical or mental impairments, that make them unable to drive or fly.

Why haven't passenger trains, which could carry a thousand people a time, been sent to Florida to help? Residents without money or the ability to travel by car

or plane could be taken to designated points of shelter and food.

Prior to Hurricane Gustav in 2008, there was a small successful example of this, as some 2,000 residents of New Orleans were taken to Memphis, Tennessee on special trains, as well as buses. A worker who participated in the rail operation noted that “At least 50% of the passengers were elderly, many in wheelchairs, on walkers or canes and generally unable to move very well without some assistance.” On a return trip, many passengers brought more luggage, as they could buy essential supplies in Memphis that would have been out of stock or priced-gouged in New Orleans. With baggage cars and plenty of space, the train accommodated this for free—compared to an airline that would charge \$50 per bag.

That operation was minimal compared to what could be done, and yet with Irma, nothing similar has been attempted, despite a far larger forced evacuation. If the state and federal government, FEMA, and corporations cared to, dozens of sets of passenger train equipment could have been sent south during the week and made several trips from South Florida to points farther North. This would require workers trained in advance to conduct the operation, and designated points of shelter established in places like Atlanta, Georgia; Columbia, South Carolina; Charlotte and Raleigh, North Carolina; and other cities.

As one example, the commuter rail system of Chicago, Metra, has a daily ridership of 295,000 riders. If equipment on that scale was provided to a region at risk of a Hurricane, an enormous amount of people could be taken to safe shelter. Instead, all that has happened is that Amtrak ran its regular trains out of Florida up until Friday, which of course were sold out.

The abysmal state of passenger rail and infrastructure

in the United States is a contributing factor. Amtrak provides a fraction of the service in Florida that it used to: three trains a day compared to dozens in 1960. One of the Amtrak trains, the Silver Star, has been referred to as the “Silver Starvation” after Amtrak cut its full dining service in 2015, leaving passengers to wait in a long line while a single food service worker prepares snack food on a trip that can take over 24 hours.

When special trains were run in 2008 in New Orleans, they used the minimal amount of spare equipment that Amtrak has. The service has survived on a shoestring budget since its creation in 1971, and most of its coach passenger cars were built in the 1970s and 1980s, most of which have no planned replacement. As one abysmal example, it was announced last week that railcar builder Nippon Sharyo had failed to successfully build an order of 130 passenger cars that was funded in 2009, ordered in 2012, and expected to be delivered in 2015. Now, the contract has passed to another builder.

Nationally, Amtrak has under 1,200 cars that carry passengers. In 1960, the three railroads serving Florida alone had about the same number. Little passenger rail investment in the South has occurred since then, leaving a minimal amount of equipment available for disaster relief.

Florida, like many Sun Belt states, grew massively in the post-war period when billions were poured into the Interstate highway network. Urban areas were expanded in a large and decentralized fashion, partly because extensive investment in roads and highways allowed more decentralized land use. Jacksonville, Florida, for example, has the largest land area of any city in the Continental United States, but is 12th largest in population. It has no commuter rail operation, while that of Miami and Orlando is minimal.

Another severe constraint to a rail evacuation is the private control of the major routes in Florida. CSX Railroad owns routes between Miami, Tampa, Orlando, Jacksonville, and points north, while Florida East Coast Railroad owns a route along the coast from Miami to Jacksonville. All of these routes have been cut back over several decades, with less capacity and fewer maintenance employees. As it is, CSX frequently delays the existing three Amtrak round trips that serve Florida.

CSX was recently taken over by a hedge fund that is

instituting even deeper cuts, including over 500 layoffs at its Jacksonville, Florida headquarters. In another cost-cutting move, train dispatchers that control traffic are being taken away from regional locations and consolidated in Jacksonville. Dispatching jobs based in Selkirk, NY, were to be shifted to Jacksonville this September. The move is remarkable, considering that Jacksonville is a city that could be in the path of a hurricane. If weather closed that facility, the entire network covering the east and south would shut down. There is little doubt that dispatchers will be told to risk their lives to come to work, and forced to work extra hours.

In a rational, planned economy, the millions of residents in need of evacuation would be provided with a way out, and organized shelter. As the response to Hurricane Harvey showed, there is no doubt that people would work and volunteer to help provide the service, and aid the elderly and impaired.

Instead, nothing has been done. The response to Hurricane Irma, and to Hurricane Harvey before it, express the reality of American capitalism. Decades of social plunder, rising inequality and decaying infrastructure, combined with the disinterest and contempt of the ruling class for basic issues of public safety, have paved the way for another disaster.

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