

Long Island Rail Road derailment highlights decay of New York's transportation infrastructure

By Josh Varlin
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An August 1 derailment of a Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) train in Queens disrupted the travel of thousands of people commuting within or between Long Island and New York City. The eastbound train derailed above ground around 12:30 p.m. between Penn Station and Woodside on the Port Washington line.

Fortunately, none of the 400-500 passengers on board at the time reported injuries, and all were transported to another train after about an hour delay.

For an unknown reason, two of the train's axles left the tracks, although the train did not tip over. An LIRR worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* Wednesday evening that they were still determining the cause of the derailment, and as of this writing no further determination has been made.

The train remained on the tracks until around 5 p.m., stopping all service on the Port Washington branch for hours. The Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), which operates most public transit in the New York City metropolitan area, allowed LIRR riders to take parallel subway lines and offered alternative train routes between Port Washington and Penn Station.

Service was disrupted well into the evening rush. A sign in the Woodside station at 6 p.m. informed riders: "Eastbound LIRR trains are experiencing delays averaging 10-15 minutes between Penn Station and Jamaica due to an earlier derailment."

LIRR dispatchers were holding trains well past 5 p.m., and full service was only restored after the evening rush.

The derailment had a cascading effect, increasing ridership on the 7 train and alternate LIRR lines. Hundreds of commuters trying to figure out their way home congregated in Penn Station.

In a sign of how commonplace transportation delays are in the financial capital of the world, one commuter told *Newsday*: "It's kind of whatever. I'm just dealing with it. I'm getting home late."

The LIRR averages over 300,000 riders every day, making it the busiest commuter railroad in the United States. Most commuters ride from suburban areas of Long Island into Manhattan in the mornings to work, and then commute back home in the evenings.

Wednesday's derailment was the second in less than two weeks, following on a July 21 derailment in the West Side Yard, a rail yard just west of Penn Station where trains are stored between the morning and evening rushes. The 10-car train, which was carrying LIRR employees, caused cancellations and delays as workers attempted to safely right it.

While the exact causes of the two recent derailments are under investigation, what is known is that the LIRR and other railroads servicing the New York City area remain a threat to passenger and worker safety.

According to *Risk Management Magazine*, the LIRR, New Jersey Transit and Amtrak are all expected to miss the December 31, 2018 deadline to install positive train control (PTC), which would protect against speeding on curves and collisions. Congress has mandated that railroads install this technology, but this deadline has already been extended by two years and will likely be extended again, kicking the can down the road and endangering passengers and workers alike.

PTC would have prevented a January 2017 LIRR derailment at Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue Terminal that injured over 100 passengers.

Moreover, the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health, an advocacy group, named the

LIRR's freight provider, the New York & Atlantic Railway (NYA), as one of its "dirty dozen," making it one of the 12 most dangerous employers in the US.

NYA, which operates on LIRR tracks, allegedly hired workers outside of a Home Depot, who were then underpaid, overworked, accosted with ethnic slurs, and instructed to hide when inspectors visited worksites. In 2015, an NYA train slammed into a tractor-trailer at a crossing where the gate had not been lowered, after which an uncertified locomotive engineer fled the scene.

The situation on the Long Island Rail Road is by no means unique, but is rather part of a national infrastructure crisis that is acutely reflected in the New York metropolitan area, with over 20 million inhabitants, which more than any other American city is dependent on mass transit.

Even within the area's transit system, lower-income workers are disproportionately affected. Lower-income New Yorkers are more likely to be reliant on the MTA even when service is bad, have longer commutes, work unusual shifts, and have fewer transportation options.

According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, a quarter "of rail transit assets are in marginal or poor condition." The New York City subway's on-time performance has dropped from 85 percent six years ago to 66 percent today.

A report in the *New York Times* on Monday cited statistics from the MTA, which show that its subway service has declined by 2 percent in the last five months because of poor service, with passengers fleeing to Uber, whose use will move the crisis of transportation off of the rails and onto the city streets.

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