At least 11 deaths in Amtrak collision in Illinois

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At least 11 people have died and others remain unaccounted for following the collision late Monday night of an Amtrak passenger train with a semi-trailer truck at a railroad crossing 55 miles south of Chicago, in Bourbonnais, Illinois. Of the 217 passengers and crew members on board, 116 were injured. Close to half of them were still hospitalized as of Wednesday.

Most of those killed aboard the Amtrak "City of New Orleans" superliner, bound from Chicago to New Orleans, were in the sleeper car, fifth in the 15-car train. The two leading locomotives were nearly demolished, although the engineer survived. The next car and 11 of the 14 passenger, baggage and dining cars careened off the tracks on impact. The double-decker sleeper coach caught fire and was wrapped around one of the locomotives.

Amtrak and National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigators were still on the scene Wednesday, and rescue workers conducted the grim search for survivors, painting "Empty" on each of the burnt out cars as they determined that no one remained alive inside. This was the third worst accident in Amtrak's history. In September 1993, the Sunset Limited jumped the rails near Mobile, Alabama when the train crossed over a bridge that had been rammed by a barge just minutes earlier, plunging into a bayou and killing 47 people. Sixteen were killed in 1987 when two Amtrak trains collided near Chase, Maryland.

Media attention has focused on the truck driver involved in the accident, John Stokes, 58, of Manteno, Illinois, who was carrying a load of steel from the nearby Bethlehem Steel mill. Stokes, who sustained only minor injuries, told NTSB officials that he didn't see the train approaching until he started driving over the tracks. But Amtrak spokesmen said the driver tried to beat the crossing gates. Preliminary data from a recorder at the crossing reportedly indicates that the gates and light were operating correctly. Investigators will also be studying the "black box" that was on board the train in an attempt to determine the cause of the accident.

Reporters have cited the risk-taking and "fast track" mentality of Americans as one of the major factors contributing to such rail crossing tragedies. But even a preliminary examination of the state of the railroads in the United States exposes the ludicrousness of blaming the population for the safety crisis.

RailWatch, a rail safety advocacy group, reports that there is a train accident in the US every 90 minutes, including rail crossing accidents, injuries related to trespassing on tracks, and hazardous spills. According to Steve Moss of RailWatch, "Railroads are operating with safety equipment and procedures that date back to the 1930s. Today the railroads are running more trains with smaller crews."

In 1998 the Federal Railroad Administration reported 2,471 train accidents in the United States. There were 11,792 reported casualties, including 979 fatalities. The vast majority of these fatalities were the result of people walking onto tracks (514) and highway-rail crossing accidents (422). Since 1964 there have been three fatal accidents and four injuries at the Bourbonnais crossing where Monday's accident occurred.

There are approximately 270,000 highway-rail grade crossings in the US, where roads pass directly across train tracks. Of these, approximately 164,000 are on public property. According to the Federal Railroad Administration's own figures, *80 percent of these public crossings have no lights or gates*, and are indicated only by reflector-bearing "Railroad Crossing" signs or pavement markings.

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The surest way to eliminate highway-rail crossing accidents is to build tunnels or overpasses at the intersection of rail lines and roads, but these can cost millions of dollars, and repairs to these structures are the responsibility of local and state highway departments, not the federal government. The US Transportation Department will fund $154.8 million this fiscal year to improve crossings, but one flashing signal system can cost $60,000, and a single-lane gate $15,000.

The City of New Orleans train was made famous by the Steve Goodman song performed by Arlo Guthrie, which evoked the history of the American railroads. In the 1940s and 50s the route was journeyed by blacks from the South, who came to work in the Midwest's growing industrial centers. The song's refrain, "Good morning America, how are you?" takes on an eerie note in light of Monday's tragedy. In 1997 Amtrak took in more than $3 billion in profits, yet conditions of disrepair on the nation's railroads guarantee that such accidents will be repeated.

Passenger rail transportation in the United States has been allowed to decay for decades. The railroad companies and the federal government have refused to make the significant investment to improve the rail infrastructure, and this latest Amtrak tragedy is testament to this neglect. Affordable, safe mass transportation is an urgent necessity for millions of Americans, yet this is not considered profitable.

Visitors who come to the US from Europe and other countries are invariably appalled by the poor state of rail service and public transportation throughout much of America. The accident that took place in Bourbonnais is a sobering example of what happens when the dictates of the market are allowed to dominate over the public good.

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