Demise of US rail system highlighted by DC-area bridge fault

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On November 13, an inspection of a CSX Corporation's Anacostia River railroad bridge revealed structural problems, leading to the temporary closure of the bridge to all traffic. Located east of Washington, D.C., the bridge is part of a line carrying all north-south freight traffic through that region. Its closure has resulted in rerouting and delays for all of this traffic, and approximately 50 employees are without work or pay until the bridge is repaired.

Most of the existing railroad tunnels and bridges in North America were constructed in the period of enormous railroad expansion prior to World War I. Nearly a century later, they are carrying trains that are thousands of feet longer and a great deal heavier. The Anacostia River Bridge is among these—it was built as part of a bypass of the capital and was constructed because of increased traffic and demands for beautification of the city. The bridge itself has a low crossing over the river, with a lift span in the center to allow small boats to pass underneath.

The bridge is a critical component of the transportation system, as it handles the majority of freight traffic traveling between the Northern and Southern states of the US, and there is no alternative route in the region. An employee described the condition of bridge the day before its closure: "On Sunday, track three was out of service, and there was a slow order of 10 mph on track two. This bridge has slow orders on it pretty regularly, so I didn't think anything of it really. The lift span joints always have problems and are always being welded and worked on. That's the CSX philosophy, just try to patch it up instead of really fixing it."

The following day, a bridge inspector found that some of the concrete piers were crumbling, and took the bridge completely out of service. Initially, it was expected that repairs would take a month, but the length of time may be closer to two months. A few high-priority trains are being detoured through Washington's Union Station, adding considerable risk to the aging but busy passenger line. Some other traffic was diverted more than a hundred miles west to use another railroad's line. For the majority of the trains, however, the diversion was as far west as Ohio before returning to the east. A service bulletin noted that customers should expect 48-hour delays.

Trains are operated by crews trained for a particular line, with knowledge of the layout, infrastructure and intricacies of the segment. They also have knowledge of all the delays, restrictions and maintenance issues that can be so common. Only those qualified for the detouring routes can operate the detoured trains. In this case, the crews who operate trains between Richmond, Virginia, and Washington, D.C., have been left with scarcely any traffic on what is normally Virginia's busiest line.

The same CSX worker added, "For all of this week the company wouldn't tell us anything, and there were probably 50 of us without work and pay. The only thing that our unions have done for us is Wednesday the 15th they met with CSX in Halethorpe, Maryland, to see if they could get us some sort of compensation, and of course the criminals we work for said no. I say criminals because that's what they are; they steal money from my paycheck for no reason, and when I look on my pay statement it says 'under investigation.' What a crock!"

Neither of the railroad unions representing these workers—the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLE) and United Transportation Union (UTU)—has even bothered to mention the situation of the CSX crews on its web site. Instead, they both have prominent articles on railroad security, praise for Democratic Party politicians, and the need to "support our troops fighting for freedom and our way of life."

The unions essentially appeal to the company for recognition of their past support in making railroad workers pay for the crisis of the industry, and plead for a continuation of this relationship. An article entitled "They Use Us, then Abuse Us," by the BLE, states, "A united Rail Labor demands that the carriers abandon their scorched earth policy of labor relations and negotiate fair and equitable contracts with all the unions representing railroad employees whose hard work and dedication have generated record profits for the carriers."

The union bureaucrats go on to boast of their past services: "Rail labor support of railroads on Capitol Hill has generated for freight railroads literally tens of billions of dollars in cash infusions, cumulative cash savings, loans and loan guarantees.... Without rail labor support, virtually all of these bills likely would not have become law."

The present crisis facing both the railroad workers and the industry as a whole can only be understood in the context of the development and decline of rail travel in the US. Railroads played an integral role in the expansion of North American territory and industry. They provided the initial means of cheaply integrating the vast resources of the continent, spread widely across its large and diverse terrain. They offered any town or region connections to the rest of industry and distribution. In America, railroads were always private, though their construction was given significant assistance in of the form of government land grants.

The expansion of railroads fueled the growth of industry, towns and population. At the time of the American Civil War, there were 30,000 miles of railroad. By 1870 the figure was more than 50,000, and by 1910 it was 240,000 miles. A large portion of this mileage consisted of duplicate routes, as several different companies would build between populous cities and into productive regions. Some areas might find two or three railroads running parallel to each other and competing for traffic. A 1941 fact book from the Association of American Railroads noted: “It is estimated that cities and towns served by railroads and the territory adjacent to railway lines embrace more than 98 percent of the total population of the country.”

The postwar boom made the United States the dominant economic power of the world, led by the advanced manufacturing of automobiles, chemicals and electronics. Simultaneously, the early industrial production of the country began to migrate or shut down. Rail traffic declined, particularly in the East. Federal government subsidies for interstate transport and airline traffic played a significant role in the steady erosion of the railroads’ market share, particularly in passenger service but also with freight.

The first federal railroad relief was the Transportation Act of 1958, which provided $500 million in assistance. A wave of mergers swept the continent; passenger service was reduced and underfunded by nearly every railroad, and thousands of miles of track were abandoned. The switch from steam engines to diesel-electric engines and other efficiencies also drastically reduced railroad employment.

In 1968, two large, competing railroads, the Pennsylvania and New York Central, merged to form Penn Central. The merged company was immediately on the path toward bankruptcy, though accounting fraud rivaling that of Enron decades later hid this for nearly two years. To cover ever-increasing operating losses, the railroad repeatedly attributed income from its various subsidiaries to Penn Central using unspecific earnings statements.

It claimed the profits when a half-owned terminal railroad sold Union Station in Washington, D.C, to the federal government for use as a visitor center, and made more than $20 million by selling and tearing down the famous above-ground portion of Pennsylvania Station in New York City, which was replaced by Madison Square Garden. One station was put into decades-long misuse, and the other destroyed outright, solely for the purpose of creating a temporary façade of profitability. These actions had a large social impact, yet they were decided by a few individuals in the interest of profit. Meanwhile, the railroad’s service declined catastrophically, with frequent delays, derailments and breakdowns for both passenger and freight trains in the Northeast.

By 1970, most passenger service had been cut, as railroads fought against their dwindling revenues. The following year, Amtrak, a national passenger corporation, was created. It took over operation of a select remnant of passenger train service, with minuscule funding from the federal government. Over the following decades, Amtrak has staggered along, with frequent cutbacks in service and maintenance. Major American cities are served by only a few trains a day, and Amtrak employees have not had a contract for five years. There are now only 572 Amtrak stations in a country of 300 million people, as compared to 59,000 rail stations in 1939.

Even though most passenger service was shed in 1971, the rest of the decade saw ever-greater cutbacks, decay and abandonment. Entire railroads were shut down due to bankruptcy. A formula was used to determine whether a line was profitable, with the social usefulness of the infrastructure viewed as a relatively minor consideration.

Increased efficiencies made many railroad occupations superfluous, but the operation of the capitalist market meant that the railroad workers saw none of the increases in productivity; instead, hundreds of thousands lost their jobs. The unions, faithfully accepting and basing themselves on private ownership and the profit interests of the railroads, performed exactly as did their counterparts throughout basic industry, handing over the jobs, wages, benefits and conditions of their membership to salvage their own privileges.

The BLE described its betrayals quite openly and shamelessly in the abovementioned “They Use Us, then Abuse Us.”Referring to the Staggers Rail Act of 1980, which deregulated the rails, the BLE boasts: “While this legislation was very harmful to Rail Labor, it was necessary to financially save the industry. The Staggers Act also expedited abandonment and merger proceedings. The productivity improvements flowing from job savings helped to restore railroad profitability. The Staggers Act also opened the door for railroads to transfer branch lines to short-line enterprises. Rail labor suffered substantially, but accepted those wounds to assist in the private-sector survival of freight railroads. Railroad bottom lines improved by literally billions of dollars as a result.”

True to the unions’ claims, profits at the seven major railroads in the US and Canada ranged from $500 million and $1.5 billion in 2005. In that year, American railroads carried 1.76 trillion ton-miles of freight, compared to 427 billion ton-miles in 1930. Since the 1920s, track mileage has been cut in half, and employment has gone from 1.8 million to 182,000. Of that figure, roughly 105,000 workers are maintaining or operating a railroad, which requires them to be available on short notice 24 hours a day, every day of the year, for a standard shift of 12 hours a day.

Despite the handsome profits of the railroads, these workers are the ones who bear the brunt of the cost when maintenance and service are cut. A mere three days after the Anacostia bridge closed, a CSX train derailed three cars as it was slowly turning onto Amtrak’s high-speed Northeast corridor. The derailment knocked over a pole supporting the overhead wires that power Amtrak’s engines, causing closure of all tracks for 12 hours, and delays for a day. A week later, a CSX train derailed several cars near Ashtabula, Ohio, blocking both main tracks for hours.

Freight railroads in North America are profitable, but at the expense of their employees and the need to maintain and expand their existing infrastructure. Combined with what passes for passenger rail in North America—Amtrak, Via Rail of Canada, and the elimination of passenger trains of Mexico—it is clear that there is no solution to the problems of rail transportation in an economy oriented toward profit. Railroads are the safest and most efficient means of ground transportation and must be an integral part of a planned socialist economy for the entire North American continent.