

Another unnecessary tragedy: Deadly train crash in California kills at least 25

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On Friday afternoon a Metrolink commuter train had a deadly head-on collision with a Union Pacific freight train in Chatsworth, California, north of Los Angeles. At least 25 were killed and 135 injured in the collision, making it the worst US rail disaster since 1993 and among the deadliest of the last half-century.

The tragedy was entirely unnecessary, the product of decades of neglect in which private corporations and the US government have failed to implement basic and available safety mechanisms.

The two trains were reportedly traveling at about 40 mph, causing horrific destruction when the collision occurred on a curve. News reports and photos described a mess of scorched and tangled steel, spilled goods, injured passengers, personal belongings, and seats.

The impact of the collision was so strong that the locomotive of the three-car passenger train was shoved back into the first double-deck coach, demolishing half of it. The engineer of the Metrolink train was among those killed, while the three crew members of the freight train survived with non-life threatening injuries.

Metrolink—the state commuter rail operator for the Los Angeles area—announced within a day that the engineer of the commuter train was at fault for passing a red signal. A Metrolink spokesperson said the engineer missed the signal after departing Chatsworth station, which is the location of a passing siding that the oncoming freight train was to use. By passing the presumably red signal at the end of the station siding, the commuter train entered onto the very same single track that the oncoming freight train was using.

The jump to assign blame was extremely hasty and occurred before any investigation had taken place. The National Transportation Safety Board is still collecting data from the site that will likely take months to analyze. The relevant information includes event

recorders from the locomotives of both trains, testimony from crewmembers, testing of signal systems and communications, and collecting a range of other information.

Metrolink's spokesperson, in stating the engineer was at fault, said, "We want to be honest in our appraisal."

However, the history of head-on collisions and safety studies indicate that there are many factors that could have played into the tragic outcome on September 12. The rapid move to assign blame essentially places responsibility on the individual engineer before considering these other factors.

The accident raises a central issue that the huge private US freight railroads, as well as the government itself, are loathe to address: the dire need for safety systems which are considered standard on subways and high-speed rail lines around the world.

Chatsworth is on the "Coast Line" of Metrolink and Union Pacific, which travels over the difficult terrain between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Like nearly all busy railroad routes in North America—most of which carry only freight—the Coast Line uses a signal system called Centralized Traffic Control, originally developed in the late 1920s. A dispatcher controls signals on a route, showing the operators of a train what movements they are allowed to take. Because all of the signals are outside of the train, it is up to the railway worker to translate them with complete accuracy. Numerous deadly railroad accidents worldwide have occurred when fog, rain, darkness, sun glint, or signal failure have caused an inaccurate reading of such signals.

Other cases of "human error" have been tied to fatigue, decreased alertness, distraction, health problems, or even death. With railroad crews, fatigue is a consistently recurring problem. The legal maximum

length of a rail crew's day is twelve hours, with just 8 or 9 hours rest between shifts. Rail workers must also work day and night all year round, with no standard schedule.

The Federal Railroad Administration released a 2007 report on the causes of rail accidents that found “a strong statistical correlation between the crew's estimated level of alertness and the likelihood that they would be involved in an accident caused by human factors. In fact, the relationship is so strong that the level of fatigue associated with some work schedules was found to be equivalent to being awake for 21 hours following an 8-hour sleep period the previous night. At this level, train accidents consistent with fatigue, such as failing to stop for red signals, were more likely to occur.”

It has long been known that these issues are major factors in rail accidents, and technology has been developed to overcome the inevitable problem of human error. The US rail system, running trains of the highest average length and tonnage in the world, is notable for its nearly complete lack of high-safety signal systems developed in the last half century.

Errors like passing a red signal would be nearly impossible with a system called “Positive Train Control” (PTC). It displays the signals in the engines cab, while also providing the crew with a range of information on location, traffic, and technical data. Most importantly, it will automatically halt a train if its movement is incorrect. Collisions between trains become nearly impossible.

This technology is located on only a few of the passenger and freight lines of the United States. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) has placed full use PTC on its “Most Wanted” list of railroad improvements since 1990.

Incredibly, an NTSB report states, “This safety issue was highlighted when a freight train and a commuter train collided head-on in Placentia, California, in 2002.” The commuter train in the incident was operated by Metrolink, and was hit because a freight train of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad passed a red signal. Two people died in the crash.

The failure of any significant progress in installing PTC over the last eighteen years—to the point where two deadly collisions between a freight train and passenger train of Metrolink have occurred in 6

years—is a devastating indictment of the state of public infrastructure in the United States and the priorities of the US government.

Barry Sweedler, a retired safety consultant of the NTSB, told the *New York Times*, “There are railroad executives and Federal Railroad Administration people who are in effect willing to accept a number of these types of crashes each year.”

In other words, to the profit interests of the freight railroads and the connivance of the government, the occasional deaths of rail workers and passengers are not enough to require critical safety updates. The FRA estimate of the cost of installing Positive Train Control across the US is estimated to be a mere \$3 billion—just a fraction of the billions poured in to bail out the corruption and criminality of Wall Street in the last year, and less than one hundredth the amount spent on the American military every year.



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