New York City: Thousands of subway signals not inspected

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According to an ongoing investigation, thousands of signals in New York City's subway system were not inspected despite official reports asserting that they were.

The investigation by Barry Kluger, the Inspector General (IG) of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, found that supervisors were forcing their employees to falsely report inspections or face punishments, such as loss of overtime, or being forced to work in the most undesirable locations, including the dirtiest and most leaky tunnels.

One signal maintainer told the *New York Post*, the paper that first reported the story, that "Instead of five signals to inspect [in an eight hour working tour of duty], they would give you 15. There is no way 15 could be done, but they would say you had to do it. It's like you think your car is fine after going to the mechanic, but they never looked at it."

The maintainer, an 11-year veteran of the transit system, explained to the *Post* that about two years ago he was ordered to inspect multiple switches on the F line at 34th street in just one day—an impossible task. He explained that inspecting each switch takes at least one hour and that he must constantly stop working for passing trains. He was not able to complete the workload for the day and refused to report, as his supervisor demanded, that he had done all the assigned duties. As a result, the worker was reassigned to Queens where he was compelled to remove track rails which involved carrying 70-pound drills—the hardest and most undesirable task for his job category.

Supervisors would routinely write that an inspection was completed even though the signal and/or switch was not inspected when it was supposed to be or was not inspected at all. A union official told the *Daily News* that supervisors were pressuring workers to submit phony reports. In any case, a supervisor would write a phony report irrespective of whether the worker would misreport the inspection in his logbook or not.

The New York subway system has more than 10,000 signals. The signals and switches are supposed to be designed to prevent needless delays, and prevent trains from crashing into one another or derailing off the tracks.

In light of the serious threat to the safety of both passengers and workers, the IG made his findings available to the transit agency during his on-going six month investigation, before he has completed the report. As a result, the lead Signal Department supervisor Mr. Tracy Bowdwin, who makes $165,000 per year, has been removed from his post.

The writing of phony reports, however, had been going on for years before Bowdwin took charge of the department. The IG issued similar findings in 2000 and 2006. In 2000, the IG found that over 2,000 signal reports hade been falsified and in 2006, the IG found that "the system lacked internal controls to prevent fraud and falsification of inspection and maintenance records."

But the pressure to falsify reports was apparently stepped-up in order to meet a federal standard that signals and track switches be inspected every month. The ruling came in response to a Washington DC commuter-rail crash that killed nine people in June 2009. The accident was attributed to signal failure.

A number of years ago, there were two major incidents in New York City that demonstrated that signals did not provide necessary protection. In 1991, a train derailed off a switch at 14th Street station in Manhattan killing five passengers. In 1995, another train operator was killed on the Williamsburg Bridge, when his train crashed into the rear of another.

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After the news reports of this current scandal, the transit authority issued a statement to the riding public claiming that the signal system is safe and that they need not worry. The reality is that the MTA has been doing everything in its power to cut costs, which as this scandal reveals, threatens the safety of both the passengers and transit workers.

In order to reduce a $900 million hole in its operating budget, the transit agency has recently reduced service and has cut about 3,500 jobs. Supervisors who have been lying about the safety of the signal system have been doing so under conditions where they lack the manpower to properly do the job needed to meet safety standards.

The crisis in its operating budget is only part of the MTA's financial difficulties. The agency currently owes $31 billion as result of all the money it has borrowed to rebuild the system since the near collapse of New York City subway system infrastructure in the mid-1970s.

Furthermore, according to a recent report issued by Lieutenant Governor Richard Ravitch, the MTA's current $28 billion five-year capital improvement plan has a gap of at least $10 billion for the final three years. The purpose of the plan is to maintain a "state-of- good-repair" and normal replacement projects, which include such vital areas as tracks and the upgrading of the signal system.

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