

Two killed in Maryland train derailment

Jeff Lusanne
24 August 2012

Just after midnight on Tuesday, August 21, a CSX corporation train loaded with coal derailed in Ellicott City, Maryland. Twenty-one cars near the head end of the 80-car train derailed, spilling thousands of tons of coal along a stretch of track. A portion of the derailment occurred on a bridge over Frederick Road, the main street in Ellicott City.

Two young women were on the bridge at the time of derailment—Rose Mayr, 19, a student at University of Delaware, and Elizabeth Nass, 19, a student at James Madison University.

The bridge was once two tracks wide, but years ago one of the tracks was removed. Ellicott City youth frequented the bridge over the road, which offers a view of the Tiber River.

Mayr and Nass were sitting on the unused portion of the bridge. In the moments before the accident, the two teens posted photo updates to Twitter commemorating the night.

Investigators say that a coal car derailed and fell on its side near the women, burying them under 110 tons of coal. The street below was also covered. North of the bridge the weight of the rest of train pushed several cars, accordion style, off the rails and down an embankment, onto automobiles in a county parking lot. The street, the main road through Ellicott City, remains closed as the wreckage is cleaned up.

Late Tuesday night over 200 students, family and friends gathered in the parking lot of Mount Hebron High School, where Mayr and Nass, childhood friends, graduated in 2010.

A memorial with flowers in memory of Nass and Mayr has been created nearby the derailment site, on a footbridge of the Tiber River. Other memorials are placed around the scene. The funeral home guestbook is filled with remembrances of the two as warm, accomplished young women.

A high school peer, speaking to local television

channel WMAR, defended Nass and Mayr against the idea that they were at fault for their deaths. “They were just living life a little bit on the edge, and some people can do that five billion times and they live to be 80 and they live to tell all the times they lived on the edge. Some people do it once in their life and they can’t live to tell their tale.”

“They were both terrific kids,” Mount Hebron High School Principal Scott Ruehl said. “Both girls were really involved in the dance program. They were pleasant; they always said hi in the hallway.”

The National Transportation Safety Board has arrived on scene to investigate the derailment and its possible causes. A preliminary report indicates that the train crew did not see the women on the bridge, suggesting the bridge was wide enough to allow the two distance from the passing train.

The train crew also did not apply the brakes, as they presumably were unaware of anything going wrong. Whatever caused the cars following them to derail, once they did, the brakes on the entire train were automatically applied.

NTSB investigators stated that the train was traveling at 25 mph, the standard speed for the sharp curves in the area. The route, from Baltimore to Cumberland, Maryland, and points beyond, opened in 1830 and is one of oldest operating railroads in the country.

The train was carrying coal from a mine near Grafton, West Virginia, in the heart of the Appalachian coal-producing region. The coal was destined for Baltimore’s Curtis Bay export dock to be shipped aboard as high-quality coking coal for steelmaking.

Coal trains are often the heaviest trains operated on American railroads, and because of it, seem to be involved in an outsized amount of derailments as their weight places the most stress on infrastructure. The recent heat wave across the US has caused additional stress to aged rails, with many reports of weakened and

buckling sections of track.

On July 4, a Union Pacific railroad coal train derailed on top of a bridge near suburban Chicago, causing the bridge to collapse. A couple was driving underneath and was buried and killed in the wreckage.

Railway fatalities are on the rise, according to the Federal Railroad Administration. Between January and May of 2012, 178 people were killed in accidents on or near tracks, not including those killed at marked railroad crossings.

This summer has seen dozens of other large railroad derailments across the nation's 145,000 miles of railroad trackage. On August 6 a Burlington Northern Santa Fe train of mixed freight derailed in Montana, and 14 of 15 derailed cars were carrying ethanol. Firefighter Kelly Gray told the *Billings Gazette* that "we were just waiting for the cars to blow up and got a good mushroom percussion." She captured a picture of the mushroom clouds created as the ethanol burned.

On July 11, a Norfolk Southern freight train traveling through a residential area of Columbus, Ohio, derailed 17 of 98 freight cars. Three of them carrying ethanol caught fire and exploded, forcing the evacuation of the surrounding area. The cost of the damage is estimated at \$1.22 million. Ethanol has been booming business for the railroads since it was federally mandated as a fuel additive, and the last decade has seen several large derailments and fires, including one in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact