

Government shutdown hinders safety probe

Maintenance accident kills worker on DC subway

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An accident occurring in the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority system (WMATA) in the midst of routine rail maintenance on Sunday resulted in the death of contract worker Harold Ingram, 41, of Virginia and the serious injury of two transit workers. A probe into the causes of the blast has been hindered because federal transportation safety investigators have been furloughed due to the continuing government shutdown.

The fatal accident occurred as the WMATA conducts a nearly \$5 billion effort to maintain the city's rail system, one of the country's busiest. Over the weekend, rails along the District of Columbia's Red Line between the key hubs of Farragut North and Union Station were shut down as nearly 100 metro workers were brought in for scheduled maintenance on the tracks.

In the early hours of Sunday, witnesses near the closed-down Union Station metro stop describe hearing a "loud noise," which workers nearby called an explosion. According to reports, a 40-foot section of iron railing was dislodged by the blast, hitting several rail maintenance workers nearly 80 feet away. Ingram died "as a result of being struck by the piece of rail," according to Metro.

Initial reports blamed the incident on leaking hydraulic liquid from an underground vehicle, which was apparently ignited by welding equipment, causing an explosion and fire. A worker speaking to the *Washington Post* on condition of anonymity said a co-worker ran towards him at the time of the blast, yelling "[h]ey, everybody, get out. This thing might blow up in the tunnel."

Workers in the tunnel put out the fire with an

extinguisher before DC fire personnel arrived, according to workers on the scene and Metro officials who spoke with the *Washington Post*.

Ingram worked for Illinois-based Holland Company, a contractor that does welding services for Metro. The two injured Metro workers—a supervisor and a track worker—are being treated for serious injuries that were not life threatening, according to Metro.

Officials at Metro said the cause of the fire and explosion "has not yet been determined" and that it "is not yet known if there was a fluid leak or another mechanical issue."

DC Metro's Chief Safety Officer James Dougherty said, "Our first order of business after attending to the injured is to prevent anyone else from being hurt." He added, "We also need to ensure we have the safest possible working conditions going forward, which means learning lessons from the investigation of this accident."

Furloughs at several governmental agencies due to the budget and debt ceiling debate between the White House and Congressional Republicans have prevented any federal investigation.

The National Transportation Safety Board, a government bureau tasked with such probes, stated on its website that "[t]he agency can only engage in those activities necessary to address imminent threats to the safety of human life or for the protection of property. After careful consideration it was determined that this accident did not meet the criteria for exempting employees from furlough."

There is little doubt the federal government would have thrown in unlimited resources—despite the government shutdown—if there had been any indication

the explosion had been the result of a terrorist attack that could be used to justify further military operations and domestic repression. Throughout the shutdown, the Pentagon, the CIA and the NSA have been fully operational.

As soon as it was determined the blast was caused by a “construction accident,” which “only” threatened the lives and limbs of subway workers, federal agencies quickly decided no extraordinary measures would be taken. Instead, the federal transportation safety agency promised to read through the accident report being prepared by WMATA.

In fact, the DC metro transit agency has a poor safety record. The system has been host to a number of disasters and deaths in recent years, with the Red Line, which travels through the heart of the District, seeing a large proportion of such incidents. In 2010, two workers were killed while maintaining a piece of railing near the Rockville Metro station in Maryland after being struck by the heavy metal rails.

In 2009, the deadliest disaster in the Metro’s nearly 40 year history occurred on the Red Line, as a train rounding a curve near the Fort Totten station collided with a stopped train, killing nine and injuring dozens more.

It was determined at the time of the 2009 crash that nearly a third of all the District’s subway cars were as old as the Metro system itself, and needed heavy maintenance or to be taken out of service. (See: “Washington DC: Nine killed, scores injured in subway accident”)

“We went through 35 years without paying much time or attention to renewing the Metro system,” said Rich Bradley, head of the Downtown DC Business Improvement District of the harried weekend efforts to maintain the rail system, adding that, “[n]ow they’re playing a massive game of catch-up.”

In a broader sense, these accidents are inevitable given that vast swaths of American infrastructure are in disrepair. A 2013 report by the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) gave US infrastructure a “D+” rating, adding that it would require nearly \$3.6 trillion to be brought up to date by 2020.

Rather than expending the necessary resources to upgrade the nation’s infrastructure, current talks between federal Democrats and Republicans are aimed at slashing trillions more from bedrock social

programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, and regulatory agencies, such as transportation safety, which the politicians from both big business parties consider “non-essential” to government operations.



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