

Governor and media rush to blame train's engineer in fatal New York derailment

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4 December 2013

With the investigation into Sunday morning's fatal derailment of a Metro North commuter train in The Bronx barely begun, capitalist media and politicians are in a rush to judgment regarding the cause of the accident.

In comments issued after he toured the accident site, New York's governor Andrew Cuomo discounted the sharp curve in the tracks and the freight train derailment in the same area several months prior as relevant factors in Sunday's incident. The governor effectively pointed the blame at the engineer, saying "It's not about the turn. I think it's going to turn out to be about the speed more than anything, and the operator's operation of the train at that time. He could have just made a mistake. .. and come into the turn too fast."

The city's newspapers piled on. The *New York Daily News* carried a story on Monday titled, "Metro-North crash is deadly reminder that human factor often to blame at high speed." The article demands that, "The investigation must focus on the engineer, who reportedly claimed the train brakes were not functioning. Could they have failed? Possibly, but the transportation safety investigators have many tools to assess the condition of the brakes."

The train's engineer, who was among the injured, has reportedly stated that he attempted to apply the brakes, but that they failed to operate. He is said to be an experienced operator with 15 years of service who has run this route many times before.

Survivors of the accident report that the train was traveling at a high rate of speed, faster than normal, as it moved southward toward the curve where the tracks turn sharply from a roughly north-south orientation, paralleling the Hudson River, to an easterly direction at the confluence with the Harlem River. The train failed

to negotiate the turn and jumped the tracks, jackknifing and flipping the cars. The lead car was nearly propelling into the river. Trains are supposed to decelerate from 70 to 30 miles per hour (113 to 48 kilometers/hour) as they approach the curve. However, a spokeswoman for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), parent organization to Metro North, stated that the tracks north of where the accident took place did not include any kind of marker telling engineers when to slow down.

Speed is likely to have been a factor in the accident, but the causes involved have yet to be determined.

The train carried "event recorders" similar to the "black boxes" on airplanes. The devices have been recovered and the data are being analyzed by an investigatory team from the National Transportation Safety Board. A preliminary statement by the NTSB reports that the train was traveling at 80 miles/hour (129 km/h) as it approached the curve, actually having sped up from 60 mph (97 km/h) minutes earlier. The reason for the elevated speed is unknown at this time.

The NTSB spokesman said that it was too early to determine the cause of the accident. Factors such as the condition of the rails, mechanical equipment, and signal system must all be examined.

One contributing factor in the accident may have been the lack of modern safety equipment. Ross Capon, president of the National Association of Railroad Passengers, a Washington advocacy group, told Bloomberg news service that the accident could have been prevented through technology called positive-train control, which automatically applies the brake, even when an operator fails to do so.

The NTSB has urged installation of such equipment for years. It will be a legal requirement by 2015, based on a law passed in 2008 after a fatal crash in California.

However, railroads have complained about the cost and attempted to delay implementation.

Another variable that may have contributed to the accident was the train's configuration. It was assembled in a "push-pull" mode. This allows a train to move in either direction without changing the position of the locomotive. On its Sunday morning trip from Poughkeepsie to Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan, the locomotive was at the rear of the train, with the engineer controlling remotely from a cab at the head of the leading passenger car.

Previous accidents involving such train configurations have raised concerns regarding their safety. Some in the railroad industry believe that pushing rather than pulling railcars is inherently unsafe, creating a higher probability of derailment and of serious injury to passengers, especially in the lead car. Locomotives are substantially heavier than passenger cars, meaning that they are less likely to jump the tracks and also provide greater protection to following cars in a collision.

Despite this, commuter rail lines continue to employ "push-pull" trains since they avoid the time and expense of having to reposition the engine when the train has to reverse direction upon reaching the end of its run.

Sunday's accident is Metro North's third crash within a year, all of which are under investigation by the NTSB. The MTA is chronically in budgetary deficit. It implemented a cost-cutting plan in 2010, which is aimed at reducing its operating budget by over \$1 billion as of 2017.

Deteriorating maintenance and failure to adequately upgrade equipment throughout the system due to cost cutting are inevitable. The lack of funds for a transportation system that services the world's financial capital stands in sharp contrast to the trillions of dollars being hoarded by the Wall Street elite.



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