Chicago Transit Authority wreck raises questions of safety equipment and operator fatigue

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Last Monday, a Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) elevated train ran through the end of the tracks at the O'Hare International Airport station. The train demolished a bumping post and plowed up nearby escalators, causing injury to 32 passengers. The wreck occured at 2:52 a.m., when passenger traffic is light, and could have been far worse if it had occured during rush hour.

The unnamed operator of the train—who has driven CTA trains for only two months—reportedly told federal investigators she dozed off and did not wake up until the crash. According to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), the same driver overran a station in February. CTA officials said she told them the previous incident occurred after she "closed her eyes for a moment."

The March 24 crash was the second in recent months involving a CTA train. In September, an unmanned train ran onto active tracks and collided with a standing train at a suburban Chicago station during the morning rush hour, injuring at least 33 people, according to a Reuters report.

After the derailment of a New York commuter train late last year, which killed 4 people and injured more than 70, the train's engineer reportedly told investigators he became dazed and lost focus before the deadly accident.

In an initial statement about the CTA crash, Robert Kelly, president of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 308, said the operator "indicated that she had worked some overtime, more than usual, and that she was very tired." In recent days, Kelly said the operator worked 69 hours in the seven days prior to the wreck. The CTA disputes this figure, claiming it was only 55 hours, and emphasized any overtime was voluntary.

Operator fatigue is a persistant problem in the rail and transit industry, a fact frequently pointed out by federal investigations. The NTSB is investigating the possible causes of the O'Hare wreck, which include analyzing the video from on board the train and inside the station, interviewing the operator, and investigating the scene. The station only reopened Sunday, after the damaged portion of the train was cut up and removed.

While reporting every bit of information it found about the operators in its briefings to the press, the NTSB has has refrained from commenting on what the impact of her work schedule may have been on safety.

The operator is what is called an "extra-board" employee who called in every day at 4:30 p.m. to learn what shift she would get. Such employees have highly irregular schedules; the assignments can require them to show up in the day or at night. The CTA's statement that she had 18 hours rest is meant to imply that she or any employee should have been well-rested. In fact, the NTSB's own reports have shown how irregular shifts that switch between night and day periods of rest are esepcially draining and can take days of rest afterward to return to full alertness.

As an example of how grueling overtime work may be, an NTSB report on a 2004 CTA collision between two trains describes the work schedule of the motorman whose train collided into the train ahead of it.

He reported to his regular position as a switchman at 10 p.m. the night before, and worked until 6:00 a.m. At 6:28 a.m., he began to work overtime split-shift as motorman, working another 4 hours, for a total of 12 continuous hours of work. He then he took a 3-1/2-hour nap. He returned to work at 2:49 p.m., after he lost

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attention momentarily while operating the train, causing the accident. The CTA work rules don't allow back-to-back scheduled work, but the second shift was an unscheduled, voluntary overtime position and was allowed.

The rail industry—freight railroads and passenger operators like Amtrak—have hours of service rules governed by the Federal Railway Administration that require 10 consecutive hours rest after a 12-hour shift, or 8 hours consecutive rest if the shift is less than 12 hours. Despite this, fatigue is still a notorious problem, particularly because many railroad operations are unscheduled. Employees can be required to work at unusual and inconsistent times, and many work far more than 40 hours a week.

Transit agencies do not have to abide by even these minimal rules. This points to a significant fact unmentioned in the media: that transit operations in the US are regulated by the Federal Transit Administration, which has no power to enforce standards in the industry. Effectively, there are no federal standards on hours of service, safety equipment, and maintenance standards in transit—just "recommendations."

The ATU Local 308's contract with CTA indicates that there is a 13-hour rule with CTA, "which has been in force for a long time," but "enforcing the rule has been a problem." The contract merely stipulates that after 13 hours, the employee will receive double time.

In 2010, the CTA cut bus service by 18 percent and rail service by 9 percent, and laid off 1,000 employees. How many of those were rail operators is not published, but a question emerges about whether that has led to increased workload on existing operators.

At the time, the CTA bragged that it "has the smallest number of employees in its history, with 25 percent fewer employees than a decade ago." Yet ridership on the elevated train rose during the same period by roughly 25 percent, from 181 million rides in 2001 to 222 million in 2011.

The lack of enforced standards in transit explains why the older "2600" series of cars that made up the CTA train did not have "black box" event recorders that provide detail information of a train's operation. Instead, they were only equipped with a simpler device that provides more limited information.

As a result of its investigation of two seperate rear-end collisions on the CTA in 2001, the NTSB issued a safety recommendation that "all new or rehabilitated vehicles funded by Federal Transit Administration grants be equipped with event recorders," but this did not apply to older cars like the "2600" series. Clearly, the CTA has not felt obligated to voluntarily add them since that recommendation.

Another question was why the train's operation and signaling system allowed it to keep moving forward even though the operator was not alert. As the investigation of the O'Hare wreck continues, it is likely that the NTSB will release recommendations on these subjects that are meant to prevent an incident from occurring again.

Whether the CTA will find funds to implement them is less than certain. The agency has just begun a four-year rebuilding project on the Blue Line to address poor track conditions and slow zones. Over the last several decades, the CTA's physical infrastructure on several lines has been allowed to decay to the point when major delays and disruption finally force a major rebuilding project.

Last fall, the south end of the Red Line was closed down for several months and rebuilt from the ground up. As the Blue Line project begins, speeds continue to drop on the "north main line," the agencies' busiest route. Much of it rests on a 100-year-old elevated and crumbling concrete structure where speeds have dropped in places from 55 mph to 15 mph, and rebuilding of the entire route will cost an estimated $4 billion.

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