

Reports on deadly Metro accident show poor maintenance and negligence in Washington, DC transit system

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Washington, DC Fire and Emergency Services released a preliminary report on Saturday as part of an ongoing investigation into last Monday's accident in which an electrical fire caused smoke to fill a train near the L'Enfant Plaza station in downtown Washington, killing one and injuring 86. The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) is facing a growing backlash as details emerge of its inept response to the terrifying accident.

The report confirms that the fire that led to the smoke was likely caused by electrical arcing, which involves a strong electrical current escaping its cable or rail, and in this case igniting some kind of object on the tracks. Electrical arcing incidents like this are characteristic of rail systems that are underfunded and poorly maintained, as cables have to be replaced or reinsulated regularly to keep electricity from escaping.

There have been at least 171 such fires in the DC Metro over the last two years, but this incident was compounded by the fact that fans designed to clear smoke from the tunnels either failed to activate or were actually activated in reverse, pushing smoke toward the choking passengers. The lack of any maintenance records for those fans indicates that they too have been neglected.

The city report tends to support a smaller report released by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) last week. While the city report shows that when rescue workers arrived they found it difficult to communicate with each other or with ground personnel, the NTSB report shows that Metro officials failed to communicate important information to rescue teams or to take life-saving actions themselves.

It is known that the incident occurred at 3:15, and that

WMATA knew by 3:16 that the passengers were at risk from the dense smoke filling the tunnel. For reasons that have not been explained, however, WMATA did not contact 911 until 3:22, and even then failed to communicate the fact that passengers were at risk of suffocation. This led to rescue personnel arriving without the proper equipment, a delay that may have been increased because the third rail continued to carry its deadly current for 35 minutes, until power was finally cut at 3:50. The threat it posed to passengers and rescue workers has yet to be fully evaluated.

On Thursday, Attorney Kim Brooks-Rodney announced that she is filing a lawsuit on behalf of seven injured passengers, charging that the accident itself as well as the disastrous response, were both caused by negligence on the part of WMATA. In 2009, she represented two victims of a crash that killed nine. A Metro worker was killed in an unrelated accident a short time later.

Funding for mass transit systems like DC Metro has been targeted mercilessly as part of the ruling class's overall assault on the living conditions of American working people. According to the Federal Transit Administration, US transit systems only receive 60 percent of the funding they require to operate. People who depend on mass transit to get to work, school, childcare and healthcare are being faced with increasing fare hikes and reduced services in order to fill that 40 percent funding gap, which is expected to grow to 55 percent by 2040.

Austerity policies pushed through since the financial crisis of 2008 have led to even more severe cuts, even though transit systems have seen an increase in ridership of roughly fifty percent over the last two

decades. This increased ridership translates into more wear and tear on rails and other system components and, combined with funding cuts, produces a culture that neglects safety at the expense of other concerns, particularly collecting as many fares as possible to make up for the funding shortfalls. One employee told the *Washington Post*, “I have never seen safety supersede operations at any time...On paper, it is said differently, but in reality, operations rule.”

Although the DC metro system is one of the newest in the country, its injury rate of 14 per 100 million riders is similar to that of systems using much more outdated equipment and infrastructure. In 2005, officials for WMATA attempted to mollify anger over its deteriorating system by establishing a “Riders’ Advisory Council.” This was quickly exposed as a fraud, as one member declared in a resignation letter that the RAC and other such gimmicks were being used to provide cover for the service reductions and cost-cutting measures employed by WMATA.

While leaders of the Amalgamated Transit Union, which represents Metro workers, have voiced some half-hearted opposition to efforts at transit privatization – which would threaten their dues base by relying on non-union workers – they have been largely silent about the budget cuts that are responsible for the tragic occurrences in the DC transit system. The union has said nothing about the latest tragedy, other than to acknowledge that it has two representatives on the NTSB investigating team.

In addition to deadly accidents, these budget shortfalls have detrimental impacts on quality of life in working class communities. The American Society of Civil Engineers estimates that transit service has been so reduced that nearly one-third of urban residents have no access to public transportation. Overall, barely half the population has access to it, and in rural areas the number drops to a mere 14 percent.



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