

Two dead and dozens injured in Amtrak derailment near Philadelphia

Alan Whyte
4 April 2016

Two people died and 35 passengers were injured and hospitalized Sunday morning when an Amtrak train locomotive derailed near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Officials said the train went off the tracks when it hit a backhoe, a machine used for excavation, that was on the tracks in Chester, Pennsylvania.

The Amtrak Train 89, which started out from Boston Saturday night, was making multiple stops on the way to Savannah, Georgia. The train, which was carrying 341 passengers and seven crewmembers, had just left Philadelphia a little past 7:30 am when it derailed in Chester at 7:53 am.

Two Amtrak workers doing construction work on the tracks were killed. Pennsylvania Emergency Management spokeswoman Ruth Miller said their bodies were found on or near the backhoe.

Amtrak officials of the US passenger train company immediately suspended service in the area because of the incident. Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) were sent to the scene to conduct an investigation.

Several critical questions arise. Was the train on the correct track, and if it was, why was a crew working on what is called a “live track”?

Ari Ne’eman, traveling from New York, told ABC Action News that “the car started shaking wildly, there was a smell of smoke, it looked like there was a small fire and then the window across from us blew out.”

Linton Holmes, from North Carolina said, “It was an explosion. We got off the track and then there was like a big explosion. There was a fire and windows burst out. Some people were cut up, but it was just minor injuries.”

Mariam Akhtar, from Washington, DC, said, “It felt like the train hit something and there were like three or four really big bangs and it kind of threw us off the

seats we were sitting in. There was a lot of smoke and everybody was yelling.” She complimented the crew for handling the situation well.

When some passengers immediately tried to get off the train, a conductor shouted for them to come back aboard. Emergency personnel surveyed the cars for the injured, handed out bottles of water, evacuated passengers from the rear of the train and took them to a local church until they could be driven by bus to Philadelphia’s 30th Street Station, the city’s main rail hub.

This accident occurred about 20 miles south of one of the deadliest derailments in Amtrak history last May when a train was traveling 106 miles per hour in an 80 mph zone just before entering a sharp curve, which has under a 50 mph speed limit. The train engineer tried to apply maximum brakes just seconds before the crash, but it was too late. The derailing of the train resulted in eight fatalities and injured hundreds.

The engineer during that train wreck, Brandon Bostian, sustained head injuries and, according to the most recent press reports, still does not remember what happened on that tragic day.

The 2015 disaster could have been avoided if Amtrak had installed a technology called Positive Train Control (PTC), which would have automatically slowed and stopped the train, preventing it from speeding on the curved track. In the spring of 2015, Amtrak cut layover time for the engineers on the Northeast Corridor, reducing the rest time between daily runs from an average of two-and-a-half hours to only 90 minutes or less. Indeed, on that day, due to technical problems, Bostian was running behind schedule and had much less break time than normal before operating the train that derailed.

NTSB officials have complained for years that there

was a desperate need for PTC in the country's entire railroad system. Nevertheless, President Obama signed an extension to the Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008, giving rail companies until 2020 to install the safety technology. The rail companies, including Amtrak, have complained about the cost of installing the equipment and asserted that trains would stop running on December 31, 2015 if the original 2015 deadline was not extended.

It has been estimated by railroad experts that it would take more than \$21 billion to repair and replace existing tracks and other infrastructure just in the Northeast Corridor, which is the busiest in the country.

Derailments in the Amtrak system in all parts of the country are all too frequent. Last month, for example, about three dozen people were injured when an Amtrak passenger train derailed in Kansas.

Like the rest of the crumbling infrastructure in the United States, the rail system has been starved of critical resources even as trillions have been handed to Wall Street and the Pentagon war machine. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq alone are expected to have a total cost of up to \$6 trillion, according to a 2013 Harvard study, or nearly twice the cost of repairing America's infrastructure.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact