

Federal report slams Washington DC Metrorail maintenance program

Alex Gonzalez and Brad Dixon
16 August 2016

A new report released last week blasts the Washington DC Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) for the “systemic safety deficiencies in the inspection, maintenance and repair” of its Metrorail lines.

The 36-page Track Integrity Investigation Report was issued by the Federal Transportation Agency (FTA) and documents the findings of the FTA-WMATA Safety Oversight (FWSO) team’s investigations, conducted between March and June of this year.

The report was commissioned after the FTA assumed direct control over safety oversight of Washington DC’s Metrorail in October of last year following a major derailment near Smithsonian Station on August 6, 2015.

With 270 miles of track and an average of 730,000 weekday passengers, the WMATA Metrorail system is the second largest rail transit system in the United States.

The DC metro system has been beleaguered by safety problems and accidents in recent years. This past March, the WMATA suspended service on all metro lines for two days after a frayed jumper cable led to an electrical fire. In January 2015, one passenger died and others were hospitalized when a train tunnel filled up with smoke caused by an electric fire. A collision in 2009 resulted in nine deaths and multiple injuries.

Over the past four years, there have been sixteen derailments, most recently the July 29 derailment of the Silver Line train at a crossover outside of East Falls Church Station.

After the rail shutdown in March, FWSO inspectors, engineers and other specialists carried out a “Safety Blitz” between March 21 and April 15 in which over 60 miles of track were inspected. They found numerous defects requiring repair, such as rail corrosion, missing and defective ties, standing water and blocked drains within the gauge of the track, missing third rail cover boards and exposed wires at impedance bonds.

“At many locations,” notes the report, “FWSO’s teams found the irregular or inappropriate installation of stud bolts designed to anchor the direct fixation system. FWSO also noted violations of fire/life safety standards related to expired fire extinguishers, blocked safety exits and catwalks, obscured or missing safety signage, inadequate tunnel lighting, non-functioning Emergency Trip Station (ETS) boxes, and missing or poorly stocked emergency boxes for switch repair.”

The FTA report found that WMATA track inspectors receive inadequate training and are given insufficient time for track inspection. Additionally, the WMATA underutilizes the high-tech, automated Track Geometry Vehicle, which can detect rail problems.

The report also pointed to failings in the TRST 1000 track inspection manual, which often does not provide clear safety limits, such as when speed restrictions should be imposed and removed, and contains superfluous “nice to know” information that impedes easy access to the most essential information required for track inspection.

Maintenance managers, the report states, require additional training and resources to use inspection data to inform and prioritize track maintenance.

The report notes that its findings are consistent with that of the ongoing investigation into the July 29, 2016 derailment outside of the East Falls Church station. A visual inspection of the site confirmed poor cross-tie conditions, loose and missing fasteners and excessive lateral rail movement, conditions that “clearly exceeded allowable safety parameters specified in WMATA’s track safety standards.”

Metro officials were aware of the problems with this section of the track but declined to shut it down because it was being used as a transfer point during Safetrack repairs. “The particular interlocking involved in the derailment,” says the report, “was not part of this initial surge because it was used to support single tracking operations” used during the repairs.

The SafeTrack maintenance program, instituted by DC Metro General Manager Paul J. Wiedefeld as part of WMATA’s so-called “safety first” policy, seeks to renovate the system to a “state of good repair” over the next year. There are many indications, however, that the overhaul will merely scratch the surface of the problems that need to be addressed.

“I’m worried that the end of SafeTrack is not going to get us a whole lot further along than we are,” Jack Evans, chairman of Metro’s board, told the *Washington Post*. “We’ll fix the whole 15 worst parts of the track, but the rest of the track’s a mess anyway.”

Indicative of the character of Metro’s “makeover” are several new appointments to the DC Metro’s supervisory team. In February, the *Washington Post* reported that Kevyn D. Orr, the bankruptcy attorney who, as Detroit’s financial emergency manager, presided over the 2013 bankruptcy proceedings in America’s largest poor city, would serve as “strategic executive advisor” to Wiedefeld.

Orr oversaw a brutal assault on the pensions and health benefits of Detroit city workers as well as the privatization of public assets. The *Post* quoted an anonymous WMATA official as saying of Orr’s appointment, “We’ll have discussions with the jurisdictions... We might have discussions with the unions, either in the context of contracts or in the area

of pensions and other benefits. There’s a potential for a lot of engagement on reducing our expenses.”

The WMATA board will hold an emergency meeting on August 25 to address last month’s derailment.

Funding for the DC Metro system, established in 1967, has been repeatedly cut, leading the WMATA to steadily raise fares while reducing services. Government and Metro officials have scape-goated the workers for the resulting problems, claiming that they have failed to promote and uphold a “culture of safety.”

The dilapidated state of the commuter rail system in the nation’s capital is stark reflection of the crisis and decay of American capitalism. Public transportation systems across the country are in a state of disrepair. Over the past four years, seventeen derailments have occurred on rail systems overseen by the Chicago Transit Authority, twelve on lines controlled by New York’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority, four under the jurisdiction of the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority, and three on lines overseen by the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority, which covers Philadelphia.

Throughout the country, critical infrastructure—transportation systems, bridges, buildings—is in a state of disrepair. In its 2013 report, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave the overall infrastructure in the US a “D+” grade.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact