

New Jersey commuter train crash kills one and injures more than 100

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30 September 2016

A NJ Transit commuter train crashed into the Hoboken, New Jersey train station at 8:45 a.m. Thursday morning, killing one and injuring 108 people, some critically. There were a total of 250 passengers on the train. The Hoboken terminal is one of the busiest in the New York metropolitan area.

The train never slowed down approaching the terminal, and upon hitting the rail bumper at the end of the track, as one passenger described it, the train went flying “through the air.” Another passenger said, “The lights went out and a few people screamed.”

The tragedy is yet another indication of the disastrous state of US infrastructure, which has been starved for funds while countless billions are lavished on the preparations for war. In fact the technology exists to prevent most such crashes, but it has not been installed due to cost concerns.

A New Jersey transit worker in the station said that it sounded like an explosion when the train hit and then “went up and over the bumper block, through the depot and came to rest at the wall by the waiting room.” He also said that, “It was going considerably faster that it should have normally been.”

Half of the front car crumbled and the roof crushed down to the seats. An engineer in the station reported that the first car plowed through a station wall. As a result, the station suffered severe structural damage and part of the roof collapsed.

A woman standing on the platform died when she was hit by debris after the train came crashing into the station. The train’s operating engineer was found injured. He was slumped over and, according to officials, was originally unresponsive when removed from the train. He is now in the hospital and is reported to be cooperating with investigators.

Many passengers were bleeding, some from the head,

some could not walk, and some were pinned under concrete debris.

Commuters reported that many who were able to do so were helping the injured. One rider described how seven or eight passengers were trying to lift debris that was pinning a woman. Passengers in the second car broke the emergency windows to get out.

Hundreds of first responders arrived within minutes of the crash. They were standing on piles of rubble frantically searching for survivors. Ambulances and fire trucks from neighboring cities arrived at the scene around 10:45 a.m. The area was chaotic, with sirens flashing and news media attempting to film the wreckage.

Most of the injured have been taken to one of two local hospitals: Jersey City Medical Center and Hoboken’s Point Care Hospital Center. Officials at the Jersey City Medical Center said that 51 people were being treated, three with critical injuries. Eight were listed as serious, and 40 were described as “walking wounded.” Some of the injuries were orthopedic and some were internal.

Hoboken University Medical Center said it received 22 patients. Five had lacerations, three had fractures, and the rest had more minor injuries including bumps, bruises, and complaints of shortness of breath and chest pain.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) will lead the investigation of the accident, but based on past experience it could take a year before it gives its final report. One of the technological issues that the NTSB will investigate, as it has been compelled to do so many times in the past, is the lack of Positive Train Control (PTC), a signal system designed to slow and stop trains traveling in excess of the allowable speed of the track. The train that crashed did not have this

system installed.

NTSB vice chairman, Bella Dinh-Zarr stated from Washington DC that “PTC has been one of our priorities. We know that it can definitely prevent accidents.” She also said that the agency will investigate a crash that took place in the same station on Sunday morning, Mother’s Day 2011, which injured more than 30 people. The NTSB had found that the engineer of the PATH commuter train most likely failed to control the speed of the train, but if PTC had been installed, it would have prevented the accident.

The lack of a PTC system made it possible for two freight trains in late June of this year to collide in Texas, bursting into flames, killing three of the four railroad workers involved. Lack of PTC was also identified by the NTSB as the most fundamental cause of the derailment that took place around a sharp curve near Philadelphia last year that killed eight and injured another 159 people. (See: “Freight Trains collide in Texas, burst into flames”)

The NTSB has been arguing for PTC for many decades and has estimated that if installed, it would have, since 1969, prevented 145 rail accidents that resulted in 288 deaths and 6,574 injuries.

Legally, US railroads have until December 31, 2018 to completely install the system. However, the deadline has been repeatedly extended. The last deadline was December 31, 2015, but the rail companies maintained that they could not meet it and Congress voted for another extension. Further, while mandating PTC, Congress never appropriated any funds for its installation on publicly operated commuter railroads such as NJ Transit and PATH.

The crash evoked a flood of hypocritical expressions of sympathy on the part of both Democratic and Republican politicians. New Jersey Governor Chris Christie called the crash an “extraordinary tragedy.” For her part, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton expressed her condolences to the victims. However, the Democratic Party, no less than the Republican Party, is responsible for the disastrous state of US infrastructure that is at the root of this most recent disaster and many others.

According to one report, transportation infrastructure spending in New Jersey fell by 34 percent between 2006 and 2016, even though ridership went up 20 percent during the same period. Spending for bus and

train maintenance has fallen 20 percent in the state since 2005, adjusting for inflation. Lack of investment for improving trains and buses has led to delays and frequent system breakdowns. This same disastrous scenario has been repeated in cities and states across the US. Cuts at the local level have been compounded by relentless cuts in federal subsidies.



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