

More than 30 injuries in Long Island Rail Road collision

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In the latest in a growing series of commuter rail accidents in the New York metropolitan area, at least 33 people, including 26 passengers and seven railway workers, were hospitalized Saturday evening after a Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) passenger train derailed when it sideswiped a work train on a parallel track near New Hyde Park, on Long Island, just east of the New York City borough of Queens.

The injuries included broken bones and lacerations, none of which were said to be life-threatening. An additional 50 to 100 people were treated at the scene for less severe injuries. The train was carrying approximately 600 passengers. Many were trapped inside sealed rail cars without air conditioning for 40 minutes, making it difficult to breathe, until extracted by emergency service personnel. Train service was suspended in both directions on the Ronkonkoma, Oyster Bay and Port Jefferson branches of the LIRR.

This accident comes only a week after a New Jersey Transit train slammed into the Hoboken terminal in New Jersey, just across the Hudson River from New York City, killing one and injuring more than 100.

In December 2013, a Metro North commuter train bound for New York City derailed on a curve due to excessive speed. Four passengers were killed and more than 70 injured. This was followed in February 2015 by a collision at a grade crossing that killed six and injured 15.

Both Metro North and the LIRR are components of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), a New York State agency, which also encompasses the New York City Transit system. In total, the MTA carries approximately 11 million passengers on an average weekday.

The exact cause of the LIRR derailment is yet to be determined, but the growing number of accidents in the

region points to an overall deterioration in the commuter railroads—servicing millions of passengers the New York City metropolitan area, encompassing portions of New York State, New Jersey and Connecticut—due to gross underfunding.

NJ Transit is currently facing a \$45 million budget deficit. Since 2011, the New Jersey state legislature has imposed nearly \$400 million in budget cuts on the system. The financial situation of the MTA is no better. It is currently \$34.1 billion in debt.

Months before the Hoboken crash, NJ Transit came under investigation by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), which found numerous safety violations and imposed fines totaling nearly \$335,000. A similar audit had been conducted of Metro North after the 2013 accident. It found a culture that placed on-time performance ahead of the safety of both commuters and workers—in other words, speedup and cost cutting. This has been accompanied, in both New York and New Jersey, by attacks on the living standards of rail workers.

In both the 2013 Metro North and recent NJ Transit incidents, a system called “Positive Train Control” (PTC) would likely have prevented the accidents and consequent injuries and loss of life, by automatically reducing train speed in case of incapacitation of the train engineer or other problem. In 2008, the federal government had mandated all railroads to install PTC by 2015. However, many systems, including Metro North and NJ Transit, have failed to meet the deadline citing budgetary constraints. Congress extended the deadline to 2018, but did not provide sufficient funding to complete the installation of the system.

The trillions of dollars that have been spent by the US government on wars and bank bailouts would be more than adequate not only to complete the installation of

PTC, but also to reconstruct the country's entire rapidly deteriorating transportation system and other infrastructure, saving countless lives.



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