

New York City transit worker killed, another injured in subway accident

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Minutes after midnight November 3, two New York City transit workers working as construction flaggers on the tracks in Brooklyn tried to jump into an alcove to avoid an oncoming train, but the space was too small for the both of them, leading to the death of one and serious injuries to the other.

Firefighters and emergency medical service workers had to climb through an emergency hatch lowering themselves down to get to the victims.

Louis Gray, 53, who has been a transit worker for 15 years, was pronounced dead at Maimonides Hospital. The other worker, Jeffrey Fleming, 49, a transit worker for 17 years, has been seriously hurt and treated at the New York Methodist Hospital for torso injuries. A third worker on the tracks involved in the incident does not appear to have been injured.

The tragedy also includes the train operator, who has been devastated by the accident, and was taken to a hospital for shock and trauma.

The workers' job that early morning was to set up warning lights to protect others who were scheduled to be performing track maintenance. Working on the tracks is inherently dangerous; but this task is especially so, because, as they are setting up these lights, there are no warning lights to protect them, particularly in a dark and curved area where the train operator cannot possibly see them.

According to some reports, one of the tracks in that area was to have been shut down, and therefore not to have had any trains moving on it. However, it is not clear whether or not the two victims were on that track.

Louis Gray left a wife and three sons. Gray's widow, Mary Abdul-Laatif, told the media that her husband had expressed concern about the safety of the job. She added, "I'm still in shock. I would like a full investigation into this."

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) will be involved in a probe of the incident.

According to union statistics, at least 235 New York City transit employees have been killed on the job since 1946, many of them involved in this kind of work. From 1998 to 2007, 10 track workers were killed while on the job.

This accident follows a Long Island Railroad (LIRR) derailment that took place on October 8. (The LIRR is, like the New York City transit system, part of the regional Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA).) In that incident, 33 people were injured, including 26 passengers and seven railway workers, as a result of one passenger train on a parallel track sideswiping a one-car maintenance train near Hyde Park, Long Island.

The injuries in that incident included broken bones and lacerations, none of which were life threatening. However, four people were reported as suffering serious injuries, with one passenger suffering multiple fractures and a crew member suffering a cut to his head. An estimated 100 riders were treated at the scene for less serious injuries. The train was carrying approximately 600 commuters.

MTA officials have said that the work train crew had been working all day on an out of service track and was preparing to cross over to another track. Unrelated to this track work, LIRR workers were simultaneously doing work on the signal system in the area, creating an open track switch which caused the wheels of the maintenance car to come off the rails.

When this happened, the work train operator leaped off the train and tried to stop the passenger train, but it was too late because that train had already left the station and was traveling 43 miles per hour.

The first car of the commuter train hit the work train

sending it into a counterclockwise direction. The work train was then sideswiped by the second car of the passenger train, and was then struck by the third car of that train, which suffered the most extensive damage.

The Federal Railroad Administration, which is in charge of the investigation, has refused to comment on this account of the cause of the accident.

With the two federal agencies investigating the two accidents having made no comments, it is too early to know their exact causes. The same is true of the investigation of a New Jersey train crash that took place on September 29 of this year, killing one and injuring more than 100, which is still under NTSB investigation.

However, it is clear that these accidents are preventable, and that a lack of funding for critical infrastructure is involved. In New Jersey, the lack of funding resulting in a crumbling transit system has been well documented. Since June 1990, New Jersey Transit has diverted at least \$6.6 billion from its capital maintenance and improvement account to its operating budget just to keep the trains moving.

In New York, the decision to prevent a complete collapse of the city's transit infrastructure has led to the accumulation of an enormous amount of debt. According to a September 2016 report issued by State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli, the MTA's "debt outstanding will reach \$41.4 billion by 2020, 43 percent more than 10 years earlier."

Paying for the cost of this debt is a fundamental cause of fare hikes.

The comptroller noted that subway and bus fares in New York City have risen 45 percent between 2007 and 2015, which is three times faster than the inflation rate and six times faster than the increase in average salaries in New York. The MTA plans to raise fares and tolls by 4 percent in 2017 and by another 4 percent in 2019.

A report issued by an anti-poverty group, Community Service Society of New York, entitled "The Transit Affordability Crises", found that about one-fourth of poor New York City residents cannot afford the bus and subway fares.

The crises gripping mass transit in New York and New Jersey find similar expression throughout the country, including massive problems with infrastructure and continuously rising fares. The unions, through their collaboration with the Democratic

administrations, have imposed contracts upon transit workers laden with concessions and givebacks that lower their livelihoods and allow for dangerous working conditions that can lead to deaths and permanent injuries. It is the bankruptcy of a system based on the needs of corporate profit in opposition to those of working people that is the cause of both fare hikes imposed upon riders and deteriorating living and working conditions for transit workers.



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