

Washington DC Metro officials punish half of transit system's inspection team for safety lapses

Harvey Simpkins and Nick Barrickman
22 December 2016

On December 15, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) announced the termination of six inspection workers who the transportation agency determined had been engaged in a pattern of fabrication and negligence that came to light after a train derailed outside a station in northern Virginia last July.

As many as 6 additional workers are also facing possible termination, and a total of 28 workers, almost half of the 60-person track-inspection department, received disciplinary action in the development.

A statement by Metro General Manager Paul J. Wiedefeld to the Metro Board Safety Committee cited “a disturbing level of indifference, lack of accountability and flagrant misconduct” on the part of workers as well as management personnel in regard to the incident. Wiedefeld said that in order to compensate for the loss of a significant number of track inspectors, Metro will replace the terminated inspection employees with “consultants” and non-inspection workers. In addition, Wiedefeld said Metro will increase the use of laser and video technology in conducting inspections, while also recruiting and training new inspectors.

Significantly, Metro's own review of the July derailment notes that the inspection workers may have feared retaliation from supervisors for reporting track problems. The *Washington Post* states that federal monitoring agencies have “repeatedly faulted Metro for placing a lower priority on safety than on earning revenue by keeping the trains running.” In his statement, Wiedefeld also tacitly acknowledged that workers feared retaliation, noting, “It is reprehensible that any supervisor or midlevel manager would...seek to retaliate against [workers].”

In August, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) issued a scathing report regarding severe safety deficiencies in the system. Among numerous deficiencies, the FTA noted that “track inspectors receive inadequate training” and that there is “insufficient time for track inspection.” To address the inadequate time devoted to track inspection, the FTA ordered Metro to “expand...time available for track inspection through additional inspection shifts...and more frequent inspections of priority locations.”

The Washington, D.C., metro system has been plagued by a series of malfunctions and chronic delays in service, as well as safety lapses that have led in certain cases to tragedy. In 2009, two trains collided due to a faulty track circuit on the Metro's commuter-heavy Red Line, resulting in the death of a train operator and eight passengers and leaving approximately 80 people injured. In January 2015, an electrical malfunction caused a train to fill with smoke, resulting in the death of a passenger and the hospitalization of 84 others.

In March of this year, frayed power cables caused a fire on subway tracks. Two days later, the whole system was shut down for a day for emergency inspections of 600 power cables in the system. During this one-day shutdown, workers found at least 26 cables that needed to be repaired.

As a result of such safety hazards and unpredictable service, daily ridership of the DC metro has plunged since 2010 by more than 100,000 rides per day, or 12 percent.

In June, Metro began a “SafeTrack” program to address some of the ongoing deficiencies in the system. The safety program has required the shutting down of

various segments on different Metro lines, resulting in single tracking of trains, with inbound and outbound trains having to share track, resulting in significant delays and a further loss of ridership.

The Metro Board is using the longstanding neglect of the system as an excuse to reduce the number of workers, which will only exacerbate the safety problems. A proposed fiscal budget issued by Wiedefeld in late October, for the fiscal year beginning July 1, 2017, calls for the layoff of over 1,000 of Metro's 13,000 workers and the potential closure of stations serving the city's suburbs. On December 15, the Metro Board voted to eliminate late-night service until at least June 2019.

The ultimate responsibility for Metro's state of disrepair lies with years of underfunding of the transit system. According to Wiedefeld, Metro needs at least \$1 billion above and beyond the normal Metro budget to adequately meet safety and reliability standards for the next three years.

The lack of adequate funding has long been an issue. In 2004, a prior Metro general manager warned that the transit system in the nation's capital city faced a "death spiral" unless substantial investments were made. Despite this warning, Metro received less than half of what the general manager requested at that time.

There is no indication that Metro will actually increase the number of employees in the inspection department, and in fact Wiedefeld's reference to increased use of technology means the workforce will be decreased in the long term. This is corroborated by an ominous statement from Metro Board Chairman Jack Evans who said in the wake of the announcement of the most recent terminations that Wiedefeld "is taking all the necessary actions to discipline people, fire people and set up a new shop."

The Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), which represents Metro workers, has sought to adapt itself to the "culture of safety" campaign aimed at scapegoating workers for the transit system's state of disrepair. ATU Local 689 President Jackie Jeter was quoted in the *Washington Post* earlier this year declaring, "The Union does not necessarily object to establishing an authority-wide system of equitable discipline, but insists that it be negotiated."

In response to the latest firings, Jeter merely stated that the union would conduct a parallel investigation to

see if they were justified, saying, "There are a lot of nuances here. ... If someone actually went out and falsified the work that they do, then that's one thing. If there is a culture of how they report, and what they're told to do...that's something else."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact