

New York City commuters voice anger at decay of mass transit system

Our reporters
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The Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), which operates the buses, subways and three commuter rail lines in the New York metropolitan area, has been plagued by the failure of a century-old signal system, train derailments, and emergency track work this summer, causing significant delays for millions of people. New Jersey Transit and the federal railroad, Amtrak, have also seen significant problems.

With emergency repairs that began on Monday in Manhattan's Penn Station, which handles 600,000 commuters a day, mass transit is slated to become even slower and more dangerous for the rest of the summer in what the Democratic Governor of New York State, Andrew Cuomo, has called "the summer of hell."

Delays and accidents on subways and commuter rails have raised social anger to the boiling point among the millions who depend on the system to get to work, to medical appointments, childcare or cultural activities. Trains are late, may be stalled in tunnels, and, particularly on the subway, are crowded to capacity. It is noteworthy that this slow-motion disaster is coming even when schools and universities are on summer break and students are not commuting to their schools.

There is little confidence among commuters that the political establishment has the will or ability to fix the aging infrastructure or even provide timely and necessary information about the state of the system.

A survey released this week by the City Comptroller's office on Monday noted that riders have a level of anger that largely follows the patterns of inequality in the city. Sixty-eight percent of riders surveyed from the poorest borough, the Bronx, for example, gave the system a grade of "D" or "F" compared to 21 percent from Manhattan, the wealthiest borough.

The World Socialist Web Site took a sampling of the range of opinion among New Jersey Transit and Long Island Railroad (LIRR) riders at Penn Station on Monday.

Victoria Denton explained the difficulties she faces just in getting to work every day: "I am a private nurse who lives in the Bronx and works with the elderly in New Jersey. People like me have to take the train. It is impossible to drive anywhere in New

York City. You have to take the subway. And New Jersey Transit is already always late. I get delayed all the time.

"New Jersey Transit raises the fare almost every year. In New York, they raise the fare every two years. Everything goes up except your paycheck. When on time, it takes me one hour and 45 minutes to get to where I have to go. I pay New Jersey Transit \$32.50 for a round trip, and then I have to take a taxi to get to work.

"Governor Cuomo is no good. I thought he would do better, but he is not because the rich fund him. He works for the rich."

Joel, who lives in New Jersey, commented, "The transit system is deteriorating. How did the governor and his predecessors allow this to happen?"

"Indeed, the whole system that we live under has reached terrible proportions. Unemployment is terrible, and that has not been addressed either by Obama or Trump. Older people need more medicines, and need to be treated more humanely by the health care system."

Charles Greenley, a day-shift Physician's Assistant at Mt. Sinai Hospital in Manhattan who commutes on the LIRR, spoke to the WSWWS at length about the problems plaguing commuters and the transit system:

"For the last three days, I have been working the night shift to pay my bills, and I have had little sleep.

"The transit failure is a reflection of the whole system. They have known for years that the workers necessary to maintain and repair the transit system are not being hired in sufficient numbers. I ride the LIRR, but this is not just the MTA, it is Amtrak and New Jersey Transit as well. Governor Christie has cut New Jersey Transit by 90 percent, and it is not so different with the LIRR and Amtrak. And the money they have is going to the super-rich personnel who control the system. These are bankers, venture capitalists and people with positions running the system. For the people on the street, the common transit riders, we get nothing.

"The transit system is very dangerous for the ordinary riders. I

think in the next two years, the transit system will get worse, and many people will not be able to get to work on these trains. This will result in mass car and bus sharing that worsens the congestion and traffic jams which are going on now.

“The two-month repair project that Amtrak is starting today is not going to do anything because there is just too much to be done. There is too much that has not been done for years with track maintenance, track replacement, switch replacement and the travel cars. There is a lack of parts and there are defective parts because the agencies when they buy, they buy the cheapest parts.

“My worst delay was four hours on Amtrak coming from DC to New York two years ago. We had long delays at Trenton, New Brunswick and another stop in New Jersey. They claimed it was engine problems, and we were stopped for a long time on the tracks. Amtrak is so bad; I will only take busses now. I’ve been held up a lot of times on Amtrak, the LIRR and New Jersey Transit. I’ve been delayed five times coming out of Penn Station this year. These were signal problems. There are a lot of signal problems around Hicksville and Babylon. The elevators and escalators in Penn Station break down every three weeks. Then they say they are fixed only to break down three weeks later.

“I blame the super-rich for this, the people who control everything. They control the Democrats and Republicans. The Democrats and Republicans are like the two opposite fangs of the same snake. Whoever controls the snake is responsible for this.

“You ask about the bond and debt holders. The problem with this is the debt never goes down. The capitalist system is based on creating more debt and charging more interest on the debt. The super-rich own some of the bonds. And the super-rich own the two parties and the government.”

Damla Ozer is a Turkish student who got trapped in the extended delays that followed the most recent derailment of a New Jersey Transit train coming into Penn Station last Thursday night. She recounted her Kafkaesque experience that night: “Last Thursday night, I was with my friends in New York until I had to go home about nine o’clock. When I got to Penn Station, there were a lot of people here who had been waiting for a long time. I planned to take the New Jersey Transit train to my home in New Jersey, but when I got to the station I saw that there were a lot of delays posted on the board, and people were walking out of the station.

“I thought those people were walking out to take the PATH train. Then, I overheard a group of girls asking the police questions about what happened and what train to take, and the police said they didn’t know the answer to either question. The announcements in the station were not clear enough for me to know exactly what to do. I saw TV reporters talking to people, but I couldn’t hear what they were saying. There were no people here at the Information Center where I have always seen two people.

“I didn’t really know where to go or what train to take; I figured I had better get in the line and go up to the ticket desk. However, the station was crowded and the line was very long. I got in one line, and it took me 40 minutes to reach the desk. Meanwhile, everyone else was asking the same questions, and we were all in the dark.

“At the desk the ticket agent told me I could take the PATH train to Newark. I have never taken the PATH train before, and the only way I knew which one to take was because the transit worker at the turnstile pointed which way I should go.

“Nobody told me that a train had derailed. Everyone was asking each other what had happened, but nobody knew. I had to read about it the next day in the paper.

“I got to Newark on the PATH a little after eleven. Then we had to switch. The PATH was packed. We arrived in Newark, and there were a lot of tourists who didn’t speak English. They were just running around panicked because they were lost and confused.

“At Newark, we sat on the floor because it was so crowded. We had to wait another hour. I didn’t get home until two in the morning.

“I have heard a lot about Penn Station. I’ve heard they haven’t done a lot of maintenance or repair. I don’t like blaming anybody, but obviously somebody is guilty because the transit system is so important in this city. It is an old system, and it needs a lot of work, but in a city of 8 million you can’t ignore it. In Ankara, the Turkish capital, the subway system is not as big, but we have never seen this kind of big problem with derailing. We have better transportation with busses which you can get on any corner.

“I hope Penn Station will get better. I hope it will get done by September, but I hear from people every day who have ridden the trains for a long time that they have their doubts.

“It is the same all over. In Turkey, there are no rights, no jobs, and people are afraid of losing the jobs and things that they have and ending up in jail. It is a crime to oppose the government. It is becoming like this all over the world.”



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