

New York and New Jersey transit woes mount

Alan Whyte
21 July 2017

Several incidents in the last number of days and weeks have revealed a deepening crisis in transit in the New York and New Jersey area.

A Long Island train went off the tracks Tuesday morning at about 5:15 in the Long Beach rail yard despite moving only at 4 to 5 miles per hour. There were no passengers on the train and no workers were injured; but the derailment happened in the part of the yard which made access impossible, closing the Long Beach station for hours creating a suspension of service affecting about 20,000 customers.

The Long Island Railroad (LIRR) was only able to restore partial service by 7:30 a.m., but it was not until about 3 p.m. that full service was restored to Penn station. Troubles were increased later that afternoon on nearly all the lines on the LIRR for nearly 90 minutes due to signal problems near the Jamaica station.

In New York City, on Monday afternoon, a fire started on about 30 feet of trash strewn on the tracks, which disrupted service on the A, B, C, and D lines for more than two hours in Manhattan during the morning rush hours. A train that was north of the smoke-filled tunnels and station was stuck and the riders had to be evacuated. Nine passengers were sent to local hospitals to be treated for smoke inhalation.

This incident took place around the same area as the derailment on June 27, which led to an unsafe smoke condition created in part by trash and debris on the tracks, causing the evacuation of about 800 passengers.

In an attempt to blame the commuters for these fires, the head of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) which runs the LIRR and the New York City bus and subways, Joe Lhota, spoke about restricting the right of passengers to eat on the trains.

Since July of last year, there have been 698 track fires. It would be a mistake, however, to just compare, as Lhota did, this number with the 5,800 track fires in 1981.

First, there were 844 train delays related to subway fires in April of this year, a 22.5 percent increase compared to 689 fire-related delays in April of last year.

Second, the ridership has almost doubled since 1981, which means that these fires have a larger impact on a greater number of people.

Furthermore, it was in 1981 when the New York transit system, through decades of neglect was on the verge of complete collapse threatening the very ability of the city, the financial capital of the country, to transport working people throughout its five boroughs. As a result, beginning in that year, tens of billions of dollars were spent to save the transit system, but at the same time, creating through lack of public funding a continuously growing long-term bond debt which is now about \$40 billion.

As a result, 17 percent of the transit agency's operating budget is used to service the debt payments, and this is anticipated to grow to 20 percent by around 2020. This is a fundamental reason why the fare has been going up every two years and is scheduled to continue to increase every two years, making it increasingly difficult, especially for the poorest residents, to ride the bus and subways for commuting for such critically necessary reasons as job interviews and medical appointments.

Currently, New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo has not explained where \$5.8 billion of the \$8.3 billion that he promised the MTA to fulfill its current \$32 billion 2015-2019 Capital Plan will come from. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio has also not explained where the \$2.5 billion that he promised for that plan will come from.

The MTA chairman has said that the agency is expecting to have new vacuum trains, which the agency uses to keep the tracks clean, by the end of the year.

But New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer

complained that this should have happened sooner. “This is outrageous. We released an audit two years ago that showed there was so much trash on the tracks the rats were standing upright.”

Despite accumulating bond debt and regular fare hikes, the transit system has been deteriorating. In April of this year there were 74,000 subway delays, up 164 percent from the average monthly delays in 2012.

The city comptroller recently released a study that found that 75 percent of those surveyed reported that delays over the last three years made them late for work, almost two-thirds said the delays made them late for retrieving their children, and almost 30 percent were late for a doctor’s appointment.

Even worst was the fact that 18 percent reported that they received an employer reprimand, 13 percent lost wages and 2 percent were fired. The survey found that those residents in lower-income communities were those most likely to suffer these consequences.

The report concluded, “We have a signal system that is 70 years old, [train] cars that are some of the oldest in the world, and overcrowding that makes New Yorkers feel like jam-packed sardines.”

In New Jersey, the commuter rail system has also been plagued by delays and overcrowding. It has been estimated that the transit agency has drawn from an account intended for upkeep and upgrades. During the nearly eight years of Governor Chris Christie’s administration, New Jersey has twice raised fares and has shifted \$3.4 billion from transit capital funds to close state budget deficits. This is almost half of the \$7.6 billion that both the Democratic and Republican governors have transferred since 1990.

Federal records show that New Jersey Transit had 67 outstanding violations citations, including some serious equipment defects. In September of last year, a train crashed into a barrier in Hoboken station whose tracks lacked a safety signal system, killing a woman on the platform, and injuring more than a hundred passengers.

Since July 1, New Jersey Transit has cancelled 126 trains mostly due to staffing problems. It is unclear if the reason is that engineers are exercising their contractual right to take two days off when schedule changes are made, or if summer vacations or track work are a factor. However, a major issue is a lack of necessary manpower.

New Jersey Transit is supposed to have 383 engineer

positions, but only has 350 available and 17 in training. It takes two years to become an engineer, but there is also a 60 to 70 percent failure rate. The union has complained for two years that staffing was inadequate. In addition, the union chairman, James Brown has said that with the additional track work at Penn Station, the locomotive engineers are “simply spread too thin to keep up with the added work.”

In addition to this, 20 New Jersey Transit buses were cancelled Wednesday morning due to what the agency called “operational issues.”

Due to years of neglect, resulting in three derailments in less than four months, emergency track work at Penn Station, the busiest hub in the country, servicing the Long Island Railroad, New Jersey Transit and Amtrak, the federal commuter railroad that owns it, started more than a week ago, creating what has been called the “summer of hell.”

Amtrak officials have determined that the New Jersey train derailment on July 6 was caused by defective timber ties allowing the rails to widen, causing a wheel of a train to come off the tracks. Officials have also concluded that the same track defect was involved in the derailment of another New Jersey train in April, which injured five people and created several days of service disruptions. In March, a derailment was the result of an Amtrak train sideswiping a New Jersey train which was caused by a mismatch between two pieces of connecting rail.

This crisis in transit is not only creating increasing service delays and disruptions, resulting in loss of income, but has become increasingly dangerous to the physical safety of passengers and crews alike. Despite all the stated concerns of the Democratic and Republican politicians, capitalism can offer no solution to this worsening decay in infrastructure. Quite the contrary. With all the planned tax cuts for the wealthy corporations, more spending for the military, and even more draconian budget cuts in social services, emanating from Washington DC, this can only get worse.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact