DC Metro train derails, passengers stranded for 90 minutes

Harvey Simpkins
20 January 2018

On Monday, in yet another mishap on Washington D.C.'s chronically underfunded public transportation system, a Metro train derailed, causing three of the eight cars to go off track. The derailment, caused by a shattered rail, forced the 63 people on board to walk 200 yards through a tunnel, with only the aid of glow sticks, and caused major delays on the subway system into Tuesday morning. Fortunately, the number of passengers was significantly lower than a normal Monday commute because of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

As a result of the broken rail, the Metro cars slid approximately 1,200 feet beyond the point where the rail broke, kicking up dust and creating smoke clouds as they ground against the concrete floor. One passenger, Gavin Bowman, said that during the derailment he felt a violent shake and then a bang. "It was about twice as bad as any turbulence I've been in on a plane," Bowman told a local television station. "Scraping metal, concrete breaking."

Another passenger, Alan Devlin, told the *Washington Post* that as the train derailed there was a loud bang followed by "unusual shuddering" and then a lurch. Subsequently, there was smoke and a strong electrical smell. As the train went off the track, the emergency brake engaged and riders held on to keep their balance. Devlin reported that "The whole carriage lift[ed]."

This latest incident occurred on the rail system's Red Line, which has endured numerous disruptions in the past six months, including a 10-day shutdown of a three-station stretch for repairs in late November and subsequent slowdowns from a faulty communications cable.

On top of Monday's derailment, faulty radio communications led to a delay in both diagnosing what had occurred to the train and in evacuating passengers. Because of spotty radio coverage, workers in the Rail Operations Control Center could not initially establish contact with the train operator and were not immediately aware that a train had derailed. Due to the communication problems, passengers also had to wait about 90 minutes before being evacuated.

Metro officials were well aware of radio signal problems before the incident. Metro Chief Safety Officer Pat Lavin told the *Washington Post* that the lack of properly functioning radio signals in the area where the derailment occurred "is a known problem."

Communication issues are nothing new to D.C's transit system. This derailment occurred days after the third anniversary of a January 12, 2015 incident in which a 61-year-old passenger died from smoke inhalation. The 2015 calamity, which also sent nearly 70 people to the hospital, was compounded by a breakdown in the basic communications systems between Metro and the District of Columbia fire department.

In the 2015 event, the fire department had recently encrypted its radio transmissions, but Metro's communications controls were not synced up with the fire department's communication controls in the new encrypted setting. Because of the poor communication between the transportation agency and rescue personnel, passengers were stuck in the smoke-filled train for more than 30 minutes. Passengers in the latest incident fortunately escaped any serious injury.

Metro now says it is in the beginning stages of a replacement of its entire radio communications system that will automatically alert staff if a radio signal is weak. However, that project has yet to be awarded to a private contractor and is not expected to be completed until at least 2020.

Metro is also no stranger to derailments. In July 2016,

© World Socialist Web Site

deteriorating wooden ties failed to adequately secure two steel rails, causing a derailment. In the wake of that incident, Metro scapegoated its track inspection employees by terminating one-third of the inspection department.

This latest safety episode also comes only seven months after the transit agency completed a large safety and track rebuilding program, known as SafeTrack. Under this program, the system shut down large stretches of track for weeks at a time in order to accelerate long-neglected repairs. The stretch of rail where Monday's derailment occurred was not part of this maintenance effort.

Because of numerous safety issues, regular delays, and fare hikes, daily weekday rail trips on Metro are down about 100,000 from their 2009 peak.

At the root of Metro's ongoing issues is a longstanding lack of funding. In 2004, a previous Metro general manager warned that Metro faced a "death spiral" unless substantial investments were made. Despite this warning, Metro received less than half of what the general manager requested. The current general manager, Paul Wiedefeld, has stated that Metro needs a minimum of $500 million in additional annual funding to restore the system to good health after decades of underfunding.

Metro's longstanding and continuing problems are yet another vivid illustration of the inability of capitalism to meet the basic needs of the population. Along with education, health care, water systems, housing and other basic social needs, the ruling class is incapable of providing the resources necessary to maintain an adequately functioning public transportation system. This is especially egregious in the D.C. area, where the federal government hands out billions of dollars to area military contractors, including Lockheed Martin, Northup Grumman, General Dynamics and Raytheon.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site