

Two crew members killed in South Carolina train crash

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Amtrak Train 91, the Silver Star, crashed into a CSX freight train at 2:35 a.m. Sunday morning in Cayce, South Carolina, near Columbia. The passenger train was improperly routed onto a siding where the freight train was stored, resulting in the collision. Train 91 was traveling at 50 miles per hour, below the allowed speed limit.

The locomotives of both trains were practically destroyed, while the passenger cars of Train 91 largely stayed upright and intact, except for the cafe/lounge car, which was bent in two. The Amtrak train's engineer, Michael Kempf, 54, of Savannah, Georgia, and conductor Michael Cella, 36, of Orange Park, Florida, were killed, and at least 116 passengers were injured.

The location of the collision has an automobile unloading facility, where vehicles are loaded or unloaded from railcars, adjacent to the main track that the Amtrak train would use. Initial reports indicate that the freight train crew had completed work on their train in the siding and exited from the equipment. Yet the switch from the main track towards the parked freight train was somehow improperly lined, for reasons that are not yet clear.

At the same time, CSX signal maintenance crews were conducting work in the area that had suspended the signal system along the route. The cause of the suspension is not yet clear, but while suspended, other rules would have been in effect and extra workers were likely in the region as part of the work.

As with many accidents, the lack of Positive Train Control (PTC) will be called into question. PTC connects signaling information with GPS and other data to provide a system in the cab of locomotives that can halt train movement in certain circumstances. The present signal system may have been suspended as part of the PTC installation, which has a December 31, 2018 mandate for installation.

Yet, PTC does not prevent everything that could go

wrong, and there are many far more basic improvements that are lacking from freight and passenger routes. The switch that was improperly lined in Cayce is a “hand-throw” switch that a crewmember must manually change. On Amtrak's busy Northeast Corridor, all such switches would be automatic, and linked to the signaling system. But across the vast nationwide freight network that Amtrak operates over, there are countless manual switches.

In 2005, another deadly crash occurred in Graniteville, South Carolina, where a hand-throw switch was improperly lined, resulting in a freight train running down the wrong track into an Amtrak train. The National Safety Transportation Board (NTSB) report of the incident noted that there was “the absence of any feature or mechanism that would have reminded crewmembers of the switch position”—a statement that could likely also apply to the Cayce wreck.

An investigation of the collision will have to also probe the abysmal conditions at CSX, which was taken over by hedge-fund backed CEO Hunter Harrison in March of 2017. Harrison died in mid-December, but in his short stint managed to eliminate thousands of employees, close and downgrade dozens of facilities, and pull in one of the highest CEO salaries in the US.

His appointed successor, Jim Foote, has followed the same path; dispatchers have been forced to relocate to Florida, and yardmaster positions are being eliminated. Many railroad workers have little ability to take any scheduled time off, are at the whim the railroad's chaotic 24/7 on-call schedules, and are effectively penalized for taking sick days and holidays. This has led workers to use FMLA (Family and Medical Leave Act) time. In early January, CSX fired 100 workers who used FMLA time over the Christmas holiday, when the railroad was trying to force everyone to work. Morale among employees is at rock-bottom, and the railroad continues to pursue sudden

and ill-planned changes in operation.

News reports are widely referring to Sunday's crash as the "second major Amtrak crash this week," a misleading conflation.

On January 31, a chartered Amtrak train carrying Republican members of Congress hit a garbage truck in Crozet, Virginia. The truck had run around the crossing gates, and the train's impact killed a passenger in the truck and injured the driver and another passenger. Realistically, were it not for the politicians on the train, this incident would never be counted as a "major crash," as vehicle strikes are tragically common and rarely affect passengers.

Yet it is likely that the recent series of Amtrak incidents may, in a perverse irony, lead to more proposals to cut funding, or privatize the system. Amtrak has been eternally starved of funding; its yearly federal aid is equivalent to what the Pentagon spends in a year on a single weapons platform. Nevertheless, management has viciously pursued cost-cutting in accordance with political demands. The new Amtrak CEO, Richard Anderson, was formerly CEO of Delta Airlines and has no railroad experience. The first mark of his tenure was the prompt elimination of student discounts and reduced prices for disabled and senior passengers.

Other cuts will no doubt emerge, from within and from without. The Trump Administration's 2018 budget proposed to entirely eliminate funding (\$795 million) for long-distance Amtrak trains, which would include the Silver Star. These trains serve hundreds of stations nationwide and are often the only remaining alternative form of transit in the small towns and rural areas they pass through. Long-distance bus routes have been greatly cut back, and rural air travel is scarce and expensive. The House and Senate bills partially restored funding, but schemes to privatize and eventually eliminate the service are likely to emerge.



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