US regulators conclude sleep apnea, lack of signals caused two recent train disasters

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The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), in a report discussed with the press on Wednesday, concluded that a lack of signal protection and undiagnosed sleep apnea contributed to both a New Jersey Transit train crash at Hoboken Terminal on September 29, 2016 that killed one person and injured more than a hundred passengers, and a Long Island Rail Road crash at the Atlantic Terminal in Brooklyn, New York on January 4, 2017 that injured more than a hundred people.

In both accidents, the train engineers accelerated instead of stopping their trains, which resulted in a collision with "bumping blocks" at the end of the tracks.

In the Hoboken Terminal incident, the train went through the end of the track pillar, and then collided with a wall resulting in the death of a person standing on the platform, the injury of 114 passengers and $6 million in damages.

The Brooklyn crash resulted from the train moving at 13 miles per hour (mph), more than twice the speed limit of 5 mph, injuring 108 people and causing $5. 3 million in damages.

After the Hoboken crash, the NJ Transit engineer, Thomas Gallagher was diagnosed with obstructive sleep apnea, and the investigating agency maintained this condition most likely caused him to be fatigued, resulting in his losing proper control of the train.

The agency also maintained that the LIRR train engineer, Michael Bakalo, fell asleep due to chronic fatigue also resulting from sleep apnea.

The NTSB complained that the LIRR had done nothing to reduce the risks of such "end of the terminal accidents" despite the fact that there had been four of them since 2007.

NTSB Chairman Robert Sumwalt also complained that last August, as part of the Trump's administration's drive to reduce regulations, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) aborted its plans to require all railroads to screen train engineers for sleep apnea.

"I'm very disappointed that the FRA pulled back rulemaking," Sumwalt said.

As a result of the two train accidents, both NJ Transit and the LIRR now require two employees to be in the operating cab when a train enters the final track of the terminal. However, one of the investigators, Ted Turpin, explained that there was there no evidence to support the idea this would make the trains any safer. "We have accidents with two people in the cab all the time," he said.

Indeed, the NTSB had just conducted an investigation the previous Sunday of a crash caused by a switch aligned in the wrong direction that caused a train to go right into a standing freight train, killing the operating engineer and a conductor who both were in the front of the moving train.

Since the crash, both railroads have begun screening engineers for sleep apnea. However, this does nothing to solve the problem of the lack of signal protection designed to prevent such accidents. There can be many reasons why a train operator could exceed the designated speed limit other than sleep apnea, such as being distracted by something external to or inside the train, suddenly getting sick, or even collapsing on the controls.

Also, there can be problems with the tracks or the trains that have nothing to do with the condition of the operating engineer.

Recognizing the importance of the signal system, the NTSB has been demanding since 1990 that railroads install Positive Train Control (PTC) technology that

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slows and stop trains travelling over the allowable speed limit for any given track.

The agency found, for example, that it was the lack of PTC that lead to the May 2015 crash of an Amtrak train near Philadelphia.

The system should already have been installed under a federal law passed in 2008, but at the demand of the railroad industry Congress gave railroads an extension until December 31, 2018. However, that is not a hard deadline. If they show progress, railroads can apply for another two-year extension.

NJ Transit faces a December 31 deadline to install a $320 million PTC system, but the FRA has reported little progress. Just six percent of locomotives had PTC and just 19 percent of the required radio towers have been installed. Only 12 percent of the employees have been trained.

While nationwide only 59 percent of all freight tracks and 68 percent of all freight locomotives have PTC, the numbers are even worse for passenger tracks, which have only 25 percent PTC installed. Fifty percent of passenger locomotives have PTC.

The railroad industry has complained that installing the system is complex and the cost will exceed $13 billion for this year alone. However, this number pales in comparison to the $160 billion boost in military spending contained in the new federal budget enacted by the US Congress. Obviously when it comes to mass destruction cost is no object; however, when it comes to basic safety measures the Democrats and Republicans claim, “there is no money.”

In an expression of the irrationality of capitalism, according to a 2004 FRA study, PTC could make it possible for the railroad companies to run their systems more efficiently, allowing trains to operate closer together, thus reducing total arrival times. This could actually save railroads from $900 million to $2.1 billion a year.

It has been claimed that PTC probably would not have had any effect in preventing the terminal crashes because of the already reduced train speeds, the complex switching routes and the limits of the GPS technology on which PTC relies. As a result, both the Brooklyn and Hoboken terminals are exempt from the PTC requirements.

However, the safety board noted that “the lack of either a device or a safety system that could have intervened to stop the train before the collision” was a factor in both crashes, and recommended that some such technology be installed. The technology exists, including wayside signals that have been in use in the subways for many decades.

The purpose of signals is to prevent deaths, injuries and infrastructure damage, irrespective of the condition of the train operator at any given moment. The fact that such technology is readily available and has not been installed is criminal.

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