

New York City MTA track worker killed in fall

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22 March 2018

A New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority track worker, St. Clair Richard Stephens, 23, fell about 20 feet landing on his head, early Tuesday morning after a wooden safety railing broke.

Stephens was standing on a niche between two columns when the wooden rail gave way sending him into empty space before landing on the tracks below him.

The accident took place when Stephens, on the job for only 6 months, was working with a crew involved in the removal of redundant rails and putting them on a work train in underground subway tracks.

Stephens was working alone when the rest of the crew heard him fall. In a news conference, MTA president Andy Byford stated that, “The crew that was working with him heard a shout and saw him lying face down on the lower level.”

He immediately suffered head trauma but was still alive when a Fire Department emergency crew pulled him onto the 125th street station platform. The EMS personnel worked frantically to save him including providing including CPR, but despite their best efforts, Stephens died an hour later. The other transit workers present removed their helmets and bowed their heads in silence for their fallen coworker.

There has been some attention paid to the fact that Stephens was 6 feet, 3 inches tall and weighed, 270 pounds, but at least one question is whether the wooden railing was designed to support anyone, irrespective of a person’s size. In fact, MTA officials reported they did not know when the wooden rail was built or designed to support a person’s weight.

Although a formal investigation has yet to begin, Stephen’s death is another tragic example of the deteriorating infrastructure of New York City’s transit system.

The latest statistics on the subway system for the month of January showed a mere 58.1 percent on time performance for weekday travel, and 64.7 percent for the weekends. This was even worse than January of last year when the on-time performance for weekday train travel was 64.1 percent, and 74.2 percent for the weekends. There were 76,287 delayed trains in January of this year during the weekdays, up from 60,455 in January of last year. In the weekends the number of delays rose from 14,182 last year to 18,932 this January of this year.

The MTA claimed that the slowdown was due to bad weather that damaged equipment and an increase in people on the tracks, including the homeless seeking shelter. Putting aside the lame excuse about the weather which, as is well known, does tend to be bad in January, their statement about increased homeless on the tracks exposes the growing housing crisis in the home of Wall Street.

There are similar numbers for the Long Island Rail Road, which is also controlled by the MTA, and had its worst on-time performance in 22 years in January. Customer satisfaction was only 77 percent before and that was before the winter.

This breakdown in service has taken place under conditions where ridership throughout the MTA has been declining.

Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo and MTA officials have spoken of emergency funding hundreds of millions of dollars to “fix” the problems. In reality, the usual MTA operating budget is itself about \$15 billion a year, and the transit authority needs tens of billions of dollars more to save aged infrastructure, some of which is more than hundred years old, and replace its antiquated signal system.

New York’s transit system was on the verge of

complete collapse in the late 1970s and early 1980s when it was decided to pour billions of dollars into the system, but without adequate funding the agency has been saddled with an enormous debt which now approaching \$40 billion.

As a result, S&P Global Ratings downgraded the MTA credit rating to A-plus from AA-minus citing a spike in operating expenses and growing debt service without a matching revenue growth. As it has in the past, the transit agency can be expected to deal with its financial crisis by working with the unions to enforce concessions contracts on transit workers and pushing through fare hikes for the riders. These efforts will only accelerate the crisis as both transit employees and passengers will suffer even lower living standards and an increasingly dangerous transportation system.



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