

Three Chicago Transit Authority workers injured in subway electrical explosion

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Three Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) maintenance workers were injured on Tuesday, May 1 by an arc blast from an electric panel in a ComEd electrical substation in downtown Chicago, Illinois. Two of the workers remain in critical condition with burns on over half their bodies.

Despite the seriousness of the incident, few details have been made public or reported on by the press. Whether the workers are CTA employees or contractors, or what union they are in, has not been reported. The two unions that represent the majority of CTA workers, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 241 and Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 308, as well as the CTA and ComEd have been silent on social media regarding the incident.

An arc flash is an explosive release of energy that happens in a fraction of a second. An arc flash and the accompanying shockwave, an arc blast, can result from a multitude of causes including accidental contact with the electrical system, worn-out connections or dust and corrosion that cause resistance heating. Decades of budget cuts have forced transit agencies to put off repairing aging equipment. These cuts increase workers' stress and fatigue as job security is threatened and workers are increasingly expected to do more with less.

CTA cut \$23 million from their Fiscal Year 2018 budget and raised fares by 25 cents. The agency lost \$33 million in state funding and was forced to eliminate 45 vacant jobs and freeze hiring on 70 additional jobs. The fare hike hits the working class of Chicago hardest. As the city increasingly caters to the technology and financial sector, workers are being pushed farther away from downtown resulting in longer commutes.

Like other transit agencies nationwide, the yearly budget decisions of CTA always are a proposal of what

aspect of service and workers' benefits to cut, not how to expand transit to meet social needs.

A long line of Democratic mayors of Chicago has held back practical expansion of transit for years while repeatedly pursuing outlandish projects. Former Mayor Richard M. Daley spent over \$400 million to build an underground station, Block 37, that has never been put to use, while he demolished a portion of the Green Line which services Chicago's West Side and South Side.

The current mayor, Rahm Emanuel, has vaguely proposed extending the Chicago "L's" busiest service line, the Red Line, south, a proposal that has gone nowhere in 40 years, while also pushing for a new boondoggle—an O'Hare airport express train that would cost over \$1 billion to construct in parallel to existing CTA and Metra lines, which would charge \$25 a ticket to business customers, its primary target.

In February a concessions contract was forced upon bus drivers, train operators and other workers who had been without a contract for two years. The CTA had been pushing for a contract with below inflation-rate wage increases and higher healthcare costs.

In 2014 a CTA train crashed into a busy station after the operator reportedly fell asleep at the controls. The operator indicated that "she had worked some overtime, more than usual, and that she was very tired." The union reported that the operator worked 69 hours in the seven days prior to the wreck. The CTA disputes this figure, claiming it was 55 hours, and emphasized any overtime was voluntary.

The United States' already decaying national transit infrastructure will be further exacerbated by Trump's 2018 fiscal budget. With no serious opposition from the Democrats, the fiscal 2018 budget cut the Department of Transportation's discretionary budget by nearly 13 percent, to \$16.2 billion. This is a mere 2 percent of the

\$716 billion that has been allocated for military spending.

Illinois is the home of 17 billionaires with a combined wealth of \$52.4 billion. The annual operating budget for the CTA is \$1.51 billion. The wealth of the Pritzker family alone (\$16.8 billion), which includes Democrat and gubernatorial candidate J.B. Pritzker (\$3.5 billion), could repair and modernize the agency.

Whether the arc blast was triggered by faulty equipment or worker error, future accidents can only be truly minimized by replacing the capitalist system with socialism, under which maintenance decisions would be democratically decided based on need, not the interests of private profit.



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