

Another train derailment in New York strands thousands

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Last week, a New Jersey Transit (NJ Transit) train, carrying nearly 1,000 people, derailed as it left Penn Station in Manhattan.

Fortunately, there were no injuries in what NJ Transit labeled as a “slow-speed derailment.” The cause of the accident is unidentified, but a problem with the train tracks has been ruled out by investigators. Amtrak spokesman Jason Abrams said, “We are still investigating, but have ruled out any issue with the infrastructure and are working with NJ Transit to investigate other potential causes.”

The derailment happened as the train entered the Hudson River Tunnel and was crossing over track switches. This is the same site where Amtrak—the owner of Penn Station—implemented emergency repairs in the summer of 2017 after several other train derailments. The last such derailment happened on August 23.

Last week’s incident occurred at 6:20 p.m. during a workday, creating a nightmare for tens of thousands of commuters. While NJ Transit was able to resume most of services at around 8:00 p.m., there were still several delays and cancellations. As commuters fled Penn Station in search of other means of returning home, they clogged streets and entrances to other transit routes to New Jersey, just over the Hudson River from New York, such as the PATH (a light-rail link between New Jersey and New York City) and the Port Authority Bus Terminal (a large hub of commuter buses).

Midtown Direct Line trains, which service one of Manhattan’s two central business districts, were redirected to Hoboken, New Jersey. The Friday morning after the derailment also saw train delays of 30 minutes or more, because the removal of the derailed train from the tracks created a ripple effect on the functioning of other trains.

This is not the first time in recent memory that passengers on NJ Transit trains have endured a nightmare after their day of work. Two days prior to the derailment, there were major delays getting out of New York after a train fatally struck a 20-year-old woman at the Brick Church station in East Orange, New Jersey.

The derailment in Penn Station exemplifies the crisis of mass transportation in the New York metropolitan area. The neglect of infrastructure maintenance for decades has allowed the conditions of the subway and interstate rail systems to physically collapse.

On October 5, the New Jersey Department of Transportation released an audit of the state’s transport system titled “Comprehensive Strategic, Financial, & Operational Assessment of NJ Transit.”

The audit revealed that underfunding of NJ Transit has led to the agency incurring massive debts. In the past 10 years, NJ Transit’s operational and maintenance costs have increased by 30 percent while subsidies have been cut. The last cut, to the tune of \$33 million, came in 2015 under the Christie administration. NJ Transit has been forced to fill the budget shortfall by borrowing capital. The fleecing of public transportation by the banks has cost the state’s taxpayers \$7 billion since 1990.

The report also detailed the decrepit state of transportation infrastructure in New Jersey. Although 40-year-old trains and buses that have logged over 500,000 miles are still in commission, there is no plan to replace them. The state audit found that NJ Transit has no budgetary plan for buying new equipment. Poor working conditions have also caused an exodus of staff, particularly train engineers. On August 28, NJ Transit had to cancel 30 trains due to staffing problems, a dismal record for the agency.

New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy, who ordered the

audit, proclaimed that NJ Transit would be repaired under his administration. Following the release of the audit, Murphy said, “This is fixable. This is within our grasp. And it is within our grasp in a reasonable amount of time...we’ve got to do better.”

The Democratic governor, a self-styled progressive and former Goldman Sachs banker, will not realize his promises to “fix” public transportation in New Jersey. His claims to be preparing a renovation of NJ Transit are belied by his own, self-proclaimed priorities. NJ Transit commissioner Diane Gutierrez-Scaccetti said that “organizational structure, customer experience, procurement, personnel recruitment, and the operating capital funding sources” are the areas that they will review.

The only priority that supposedly combats the dangerous state of NJ Transit’s physical infrastructure is the premise of finding new funding sources. The audit proposes that this be done through the creation of an office dedicated to increasing the value of NJ Transit by more than \$5 billion.

Murphy, an incarnation of the nexus between Wall Street and the Democratic Party, will not allocate the resources necessary to fix public transportation in the state of New Jersey. Five billion dollars—and that is if the promised funds ever materialize—would prove entirely insufficient, as the audit published by his own state government demonstrated.

As NJ Transit collapses the crisis of public transportation continues to sharpen in New York City.

According to a report cited in the *New York Times*, only 58.1 percent of all weekday subway trains arrived at their stations on time during the month of January 2018. On the least reliable line, the F train, only 32.2 percent of trains arrived on time.

Although Governor Andrew Cuomo unveiled a \$700 million emergency plan in 2017 to complete urgently needed repairs on tracks and signals, the conditions for most riders have continued to degrade. Andy Byford, the New York City Transit Authority president, has also announced a \$37 billion plan to fix the subways. But there is little possibility that it will ever be implemented, as New York Mayor Bill de Blasio and Cuomo publicly bicker over who should pay for the repairs. If the plan were to be implemented, riders would contend with reduced service, particularly during weekends and nights, for years.

In a region with one of the highest concentration of billionaires in the world, there are apparently no funds to pay for the maintenance of mass transportation services that millions of commuters depend upon. Consequently, working people will pay a price in higher tolls and ticket prices, longer delays, and potentially with their lives, for this criminal neglect of infrastructure by Democratic and Republican politicians.



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