

# Latest collision on Long Island Rail Road shows fatal consequences of system-wide neglect

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On Tuesday, three men were killed when two Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) commuter trains struck their truck at a rail-crossing in Westbury, Nassau County, New York. The three men, Miguel Angel Jimenez Luna, Jesus Hernandez and Saul Martinez were workers at a Fine Foods Supermarket about half a mile away from the rail crossing. They were killed instantly.

The truck was in the middle of the narrow double tracks when struck first by a westbound train that had just departed from Westbury station, and then moments later by an eastbound train travelling much faster from Hicksville. The truck had driven around the lowered railroad crossing gate, apparently to beat the train traffic. Often gates can be lowered when there are no trains in sight.

Eyewitnesses said the men in the truck were driving away from a minor collision with another car at the shopping mall less than a mile away where they had spent the evening. The second driver in the accident had reportedly threatened to call the police.

The first two cars of the second train that struck the truck derailed and slid into the Westbury station platform, slamming through part the concrete structure. The front train car, including the driver's seat, was cut into by the side of platform. All that remained of the truck the men had been driving was its engine.

The two trains were carrying about 1,000 riders. Six passengers and the driver of the second train were injured. Remarkably, the driver-engineer was not killed by the train's collision with the station platform because he abandoned the driver's seat and ran into the first car, warning and shoving the only passenger in that car to protect him. He and the passenger were the most seriously injured of those on the train.

On Wednesday morning, dozens of commuter trains were forced to pass on the single lane that was left open because the site of the crashed train had not been cleared, and delays continued into Thursday morning.

This is the latest incident of infrastructural and safety failures on the LIRR, and more broadly of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) that manages the LIRR as well as the subway and bus systems in New York City, several bridges and tunnels, and the MetroNorth commuter rail that services suburbs north of the city.

The track crossing on School Street in Westbury where the three men were killed Tuesday had been cited as one of seven dangerous crossings in Nassau County scheduled to be closed in 2020. This is part of a \$2.5 billion renovation to the 20 mile stretch of rail where two commuter lines in Long Island converge into one. These track-crossings put tens of thousands of drivers and train riders very close to each other, with no more than a few meters of room between them, and are so dangerous that they should not have been operating.

The LIRR has been the scene of serious accidents in past months. In August, a LIRR commuter train derailed between Woodside, Queens, and Penn Station, Manhattan, the last and second-to-last stops on the line.

On December 31, a "minor derailment" caused delays at Penn Station, and in January two LIRR service trains derailed in train depots in Brooklyn and Queens, causing delays for dozens of trains that could not depart. In addition to derailments, in 2018 the LIRR experienced its worst on-time performance in 19 years, with around 90 percent of trains delayed.

These derailments are not only reflective of the decay of mass transit in New York City—the subway and bus

systems are in equally disastrous state—but are systematic faults of a social system which is no longer able to respond properly to a crisis that affects millions of commuters daily. As one LIRR commuter told the WWSW in August, “The Long Island Rail Road is just getting worse and worse.”

The renovation proposal that included the School Street crossing is part of the current MTA Fast Forward program. This latest proposal by the MTA to entirely renovate the transit system in the next 10 years has been presented as costing \$40 billion, but has been estimated as requiring \$60 billion.

This amount has no prospect of being collected by the MTA in a fiscally responsible manner. Loans from the city and state governments together only amount to about \$11 billion. Last month, the state Legislature, controlled by a super-majority of Democrats, tried to retract \$7.3 billion in spending promised by Governor Andrew Cuomo to the MTA because the plans for improvements were too vague, which, in fact, they are.

This is in the face of a vast decline of annual contributions to the MTA by both the state and city over the last 25 years. In 2017, for example, the city contributed \$250 million dollars to the MTA budget, a quarter of its contribution in 1990.

The enormous amount now being estimated to revitalize and maintain this system is the fault of the Democrats and Republicans who have set New York City and state budgets over this time period.

Both Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio, in office for five years, and Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, in office for eight years, routinely blame the state or the city for not contributing more to the MTA’s budget. Governor Cuomo and the State Legislature, until recently almost even balanced between Democrats and Republicans, bear special responsibility for the decline of the MTA and the LIRR.

Characteristic of top LIRR and MTA officials who seek to blame the often deadly shortcomings of New York’s mass transit system on individuals, whether train or automobile drivers or commuters, LIRR president Philip Eng said, “Why folks try to risk their lives and other people’s lives, perhaps to save a few minutes, is one I can’t answer.”

Even more revealing was a suggestion by MTA board member Norman Brown, who proposed that owners or operators of the vehicles in train crashes be held

financially liable. “The expense here is huge, there’s no reason it should be borne solely by the MTA. Maybe we could pass some legislation here that could put some of the weight on the operators of these vehicles.”

Both comments reflect an MTA leadership that is so cynical and demoralized by the advanced state of decay of the largest mass transit system in the US, that they can think of nothing better than to penalize the working-class victims of decades of their bosses’ budget cuts. The upcoming fare-hike on the system, which will pass the burden of raising revenue on to commuters, is another sign of this foul mixture of desperation and contempt by those who manage the MTA.



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