

Severe winter weather delays plague train travel in America and Canada

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5 March 2019

Last week, an Amtrak train carrying 183 passengers was stranded in the small town of Oakridge, Oregon, after trees which fell during heavy snowfall blocked the tracks. Train number 14, the Coast Starlight, was headed from Seattle to Los Angeles, and was about to begin the climb into the Cascade Mountains as the shutdown of the railroad, owned by Union Pacific, stalled its progress.

As the delay climbed to a total of 36 hours, the stranded passengers became a national news story. The crew of the train was stranded as well and worked extreme hours without rest to assist passengers as communication remained spotty and supplies dwindled.

Amtrak lead service attendant James Lake, who ran the cafe/lounge car on the train, became a crucial source of help for the passengers. He continued the work of providing food, but also organized musicians to play for children, let passengers use his phone who didn't have phone reception, and heard out their misery. As reported in the *Oregonian*, "When supplies ran out, he fashioned makeshift diapers for passengers with youngsters, using terrycloth towels and hunting for safety pins over the intercom."

The extreme delay of the Coast Starlight is not an isolated example, though it is the most extreme. Amtrak's long-distance trains have faced common delays of five, 10, or even 15 hours. In other cases, they have been canceled outright prior to a winter storm. In Canada, the twice-weekly Canadian that runs between Vancouver and Toronto, serving remote areas and big cities alike, has been 10-36 hours late nearly every time it has run this winter.

Winter has been severe in many places, bringing unusually fierce cold and heavy snowfall. Yet it is not the only explanation of the atrocious delays. Railways in Russia also cover extreme distances and weather

conditions, but a delay that even measures in hours would be considered unusual. In the United States, winter weather often causes major flight delays and cancellations, and deadly chaos on interstates, and trains had been previously been the most reliable way to keep traveling during the winter.

In the US and Canada, the private ownership of railways and the general drive to cut costs to boost profits – or in the case of Amtrak, to reduce any kind of public subsidy – leads to worse and worse service. Amtrak in the United States and Via in Canada largely operate over private freight railroads.

Over decades, the freight railroads have rationalized their networks and operations to extract ever greater amounts of tonnage hauled out of fewer routes and fewer employees. Surplus routes and capacity have been cut, and railroad employment hovers around 235,000, down from 1 million workers in 1958. To cut that many employees, many operations have become "remote," and far fewer employees work along the routes even as they carry more traffic.

Every few dozen miles used to have station agents who marketed service and served traffic, all of which is now gone. Traffic was one controlled by operators located along routes, with intimate first-hand knowledge; now dispatchers work remotely from a far-removed headquarters, get hundreds of miles of operations dumped into their workload, and work an entire shift barely able to pause for a bathroom break.

Freight trains used to be shorter and had crewmembers in a caboose on the end who could assist with work and diagnose problems. Now, they are two, three, even four times longer and that much heavier, and two people in the front are responsible for everything. If a freight train running ahead of a passenger train has a problem, it routinely can take

hours to fix while clogging up a whole route.

At present, US freight railroads are implementing the fraudulent “Precision Scheduled Railroading,” which relies on a program of cuts to boost the stock price. It has a notorious record of reducing maintenance personnel, from those who maintain locomotives and equipment, to those who keep the railroad tracks maintained, or those who work on the signaling systems.

All told, far fewer workers have far more work pinned on them, and when something goes wrong—a guarantee in winter weather—there are fewer workers to respond, and they are more and more spread out. Union Pacific, the railroad the Coast Starlight was stranded on, is currently implementing Precision Scheduled Railroading and has announced thousands of layoffs while cutting equipment and maintenance. In Oregon, questions could be asked about whether they proactively prepared for the forecasted snowfall and had enough maintenance employees in the area to handle the problems that arose.

Aside from that, freight railroads sometimes prioritize their own traffic over passenger traffic. In Canada, that is the largest explanation of the preposterous 30-plus hour delays to the cross-country Canadian. It operates over Canadian National, which routinely makes the Via train sit for hours while freight traffic passes.

Finally, Amtrak delays have sources linked to Amtrak itself. The railroad is (technically) a for-profit corporation with funds that partly come from the federal government, but are a pittance compared to the needs, and change on the whim of Congress every year. Most of Amtrak’s equipment is incredibly old, and prone to problems in colder winter weather. Every Amtrak CEO takes the mantle of cutting costs and finally achieving profits, none more notoriously than the current CEO, Richard Anderson, who was formerly CEO of Delta Air Lines.

Under Anderson’s control, Amtrak has sought to effectively destroy its national network by eliminating long-distance trains and reverting to shorter corridors. In pursuit of that goal, Amtrak continues to put out rigged data to try to prove that long-distance trains are the major drain on Amtrak’s finances. In the case of the daily Southwest Chief between Chicago and Los Angeles, Amtrak held back its own matching funds when other sources tried to provide the majority of

funding to improve maintenance in New Mexico and Kansas. Instead, Amtrak sought to disconnect the route and replace that portion with a charter bus. In other cases, Amtrak has cut amenities provided to passengers, station agents, discounts, and other features, seemingly on its own warpath to reduce ridership to justify cutbacks.



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