Deadly train derailment in Montana exposes decrepit state of US infrastructure

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The derailment of an Amtrak passenger train in northern Montana Saturday, which killed three people and injured at least 50, is the latest in a string of accidents and disasters that are the result of the decayed, underfunded and underdeveloped infrastructure in the United States.

According to investigators, the train, known as the Empire Builder, was traveling below the track's speed limit of 79 miles per hour when eight of its ten cars went off the rails at a switch with a side rail just outside the community of Joplin, Montana. Several cars tipped on their side, trapping passengers and crew who were rescued by residents rushing to the scene with ladders. The railroad's owner, BNSF, reported that the switch had just been inspected two days before the accident.

While Amtrak is subsidized by state and federal funds, the trains mostly ride on rails that are privately owned by freight railroad companies like BNSF, a subsidiary of Berkshire Hathaway, and are used for both passenger and freight traffic. BNSF reported a net profit of $5.48 billion in 2019, while its parent company reported a net profit of $42.5 billion 2020.

Passenger and freight rails services are now blocked on a key transit artery between the Midwest and West Coast as the investigation and clean up continues. The Empire Builder takes passengers on a 2,200 mile route from Chicago, Illinois to Seattle, Washington or Portland, Oregon via St. Paul, Minnesota. On average, more than 400,000 passengers ride the cross country train every year.

The three victims have been identified as husband and wife Don and Margie Varnadoe from Glynn County, Georgia, who were celebrating their 50th anniversary, and 28-year-old software engineer Zach Schneider from Fairview Heights, Illinois.

Even as the investigation into the cause of the crash by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is in its initial stages, with a preliminary report expected in 30 days, there are already indications of what possibly went wrong.

Former NTSB rail accident investigator Russ Quimby told the Associated Press that the derailment appeared to be the result of a heat related failure of the track. "This has all the earmarks of a track buckle also," Quimby explained. "Sometimes a locomotive, which is heavier, will make it through" a buckled track, "but the cars following won't. You saw that in this accident," he noted.

Temperatures in Joplin Saturday exceeded 84 degrees Fahrenheit. This summer brought record-breaking, prolonged heat to Montana as part of a broader heat wave that hit the northwestern US and Canada. The extreme heat, driven by man-made climate change, resulted in hundreds of deaths and stressed infrastructure to the breaking point across the region.

Railroad safety expert David Clarke, director of the Center for Transportation Research at the University of Tennessee, told the AP that it is possible that a defect in the track or switch, which would not have been detected by a routine inspection, could have triggered the crash. "Did the switch play some role? It might have been that the front of the train hit the switch, and it started fish-tailing and that flipped the back part of the train," Clarke said.

The Montana derailment is only the latest deadly Amtrak accident in the last decade. Eight people died and more than 200 were injured in 2015 when the Amtrak Northeast Regional flew off its rails in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; three were killed and 57 injured when the Amtrak Cascades derailed just south of Tacoma, Washington; and two crew members were killed in 2018 when the Amtrak Silver Star collided

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with a stationary CSX freight train after being misdirected onto a sidetrack.

Decades of cutbacks and underinvestment have hobbled the United States' rail system. Railroad infrastructure and railroad workers have been put under increased stress as rail companies have reduced the number of crew on freight trains, sometimes to just one, while increasing their length, with trains reaching up to three miles in order to deal with port congestion along the West Coast.

High speed train travel, common in Asia and Europe, is all but non-existent in the US. Only a single train can reach speeds up to 150 mph, the Acela, which connects Boston to Washington D.C. However, the ability of the train to run at peak speeds is limited by the fact that it operates on lines also used by freight and regional passenger trains. Plans for a high speed line in California have been hobbled by repeated delays and cost overruns. The first segment of the line is set to begin operation in 2029, nearly two decades after the project was approved by voters.

As the rich pile up ever greater amounts of wealth, allowing billionaires to fly on private rocket ships to space, the public infrastructure that tens of millions rely on every day is crumbling, with deadly effects. Pockmarked freeways, train crashes, bridge failures, condo collapses, mass power outages and major flooding are just some of the consequences of decades of systematic deregulation and defunding for the enrichment of the financial oligarchy.

The 2021 review of the nation’s infrastructure by the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) gave the United States a C-. The ASCE found that the passenger rail system has a $45.2 billion repair backlog, with just $713 million spent on repair projects by Amtrak between 2017 and 2019. Meanwhile the country’s roads were given a failing D grade, with 43 percent of public roadways in poor or mediocre condition and a $786 billion backlog in road and bridge repairs or enhancement needs.

Last week, the House passed a $768 billion budget for the Pentagon for 2022, $15 billion more than requested by President Biden, including $24.7 billion for nuclear weapon modernization. Just one year of the funding which is spent on war and preparations for military aggression abroad could fill the road repair backlog.

According to the Costs of War Project, the so-called “global war on terror” launched by US imperialism in the aftermath of 9/11, which killed more than 1 million people, has cost the country $9 trillion over 20 years. The ASCE estimates that less than one third of the money spent on the wars, $2.6 trillion, is needed to repair all of the infrastructure problems in the US.

Despite the burning need for a major overhaul of the country’s infrastructure, the Democratic-controlled Congress is haggling over a $1 trillion infrastructure bill that will barely scratch the surface, with billions of dollars to be funneled into the banks and private corporations. The main purpose of the measures under discussion is to prepare for war with China, a prospect that places tens of millions of lives at risk.

The deadliest outcome of the subordination of everything to the interests of Wall Street has been the collapse of the country’s public health and health care system under the pressure brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The bipartisan “herd immunity” and back to work, back to school policy pursued by the ruling elite has resulted in the deaths of at least 700,000 Americans, more than one out of every 500 residents.

With the abysmal state of infrastructure, the ongoing consequences of the pandemic and continued rise of massive social inequality the ruling class prove the bankruptcy of capitalism, the social and economic order on which it rests.

The solution to the social crisis in the United States, as it is for the world, is the transformation of society under the democratic control of the working class to run on the basis of human need and not private profit. Trillions must be expropriated from the rich and the big banks, while the largest corporations are turned into public utilities run by workers themselves, on the basis of a socialist program.

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