Washington D.C. transit system recalls over 60 percent of rail fleet after derailment exposes critical flaws

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A train derailment in the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) in mid-October has exposed critical defects in the system's 7000-series metro cars, prompting their immediate removal from service and bringing the nation's third largest transit system to a near-standstill.

Last month, the *Washington Post* reported that a National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) inspection of a derailment on WMATA's Blue Line revealed "multiple axles out of compliance with manufacturer specifications."

At the time of the derailment 187 passengers were evacuated. The *Post* reported that the transit system was forced to pull 60 percent of its fleet out of service before last Monday's morning rush. The transit authority has stated that passengers could face extended wait times and overly crowded trains and platforms until November 15.

Most alarmingly, an article in the *Post* on October 28 stated that the metro safety commission "has allowed Metro to propose a plan that would return non-defective 7000-series cars back to service—without knowing the reason for the malfunction—that assumes frequent inspections or other detection methods." This is despite several dozen instances of similar defects occurring in the 7000-series which the *Post* declares "could have led to a catastrophic incident."

NTSB Chairperson Jennifer Homendy further added in a public statement on October 12 that the train involved in the original derailment had experienced a series of derailments that day.

In two instances, the train's brake discs were found at Largo Town Center and Arlington Cemetery stations. The final one was near Rosslyn metro station, resulting in a total derailment with around 400 passengers having to evacuate the train and being escorted out of the tunnels by Arlington County firefighters. To add further insult to injury after endangering their lives, WMATA gifted the stranded passengers a $21 smart trip card credit.

The sudden removal of the cars has left only 40 cars operating on the transit system's 117 miles of track. This has led to "some of the most crowded rail cars and stations since the coronavirus pandemic was declared early last year," said the *Post*. Waiting periods of more than 30 minutes between trains have snarled services in the transit system.

NTSB officials noted October 13 that WMATA had been warned about the flaws in the 7000-series wheel axles as far back as 2017, raising the question of why nothing had been done about a potentially deadly defect in the majority of the system's train fleet. According to the *Post*, the Metro leadership had failed to alert the transit safety commission about the flaws they had seen, a violation of protocol.

Further NTSB investigations had found that there were a total of 31 test failures prior to the derailment, which were discovered during routine 90-day railcar inspections. The push for these cars was part of WMATA's attempt to win back customers during a 2017 campaign initiative known as "Back2Good."

A chief selling point of the campaign was a pitch proclaiming that 7000-series train cars were wrapped in environmentally friendly vinyl. This initiative also coincided with an increase in fares by about 10 to 25 cents and by cuts in service.

The 7000-series, manufactured by Kawasaki Rail Car Inc. based out of Yonkers, New York, had only

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been in service since 2015. The model was introduced after an electrical fire filled a metro tunnel with smoke and led to the asphyxiation death of one rider in 2016.

The transit system has been "repeatedly faulted" by federal monitoring agencies "for placing a lower priority on safety than on earning revenue by keeping the trains running," according to the *Post.* During the pandemic this has only become worse, as 1,847 COVID-19 cases have been traced to metro, and seven workers have died.

"He [WMATA General Manager Paul J. Wiedefeld] should be out of there!" said a transit bus operator to the *World Socialist Web Site*. The driver noted the transit system had previously tried pinning blame for dangerous defects on low-level employees. "There is no excuse for this. Three derailments in one day, and they waited until the third time to stop the train!" he exclaimed in disgust.

The metro system is relatively new in relation to the US, only having been created in 1967, but it has been plagued by dangerous incidents since its inception. This is despite "hundreds of millions of dollars spent to improve safety on the system," laments the *Post* .

In January 2018, one of the 7000-series train cars derailed in a station near Farragut North, in downtown Washington D.C., forcing 63 people to evacuate over a prolonged distance of about two football fields. In March 2016, WMATA was forced to suspend all train services temporarily after a series of electrical fires were detected on the tracks. A July derailment that year resulted in WMATA terminating six inspection workers, with others receiving disciplinary action based on dubious claims of negligence and fabrication.

The deadliest incident, a train-on-train collision in 2009, left nine people dead, including the operator of one train and 80 people injured. Yet this has not stopped WMATA's prioritization of profits over safety since then.

The latest debacle in WMATA's metro rail cars comes after receiving federal relief funding of more than $767 million from the CARES Act, according to a statement published on WMATA's news page on May 12, 2020. They stated that this relief "... is helping Metro close out the current fiscal year with a balanced budget, following an unprecedented drop in fare revenue due to the pandemic crisis response."

The Washington D.C. transit system has been severely disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic, with ridership levels dropping severely in 2020. By April, they had returned to nearly 80 percent pre-pandemic levels and were "trending in the right direction," said Neil Albert of the DowntownDC Business Improvement District to the *Post*. The publication notes that, with the latest disruption of services, "officials worry about damaging a fragile recovery."

On Thursday, WMATA General Manager Paul J. Wiedefeld introduced a proposed budget for the system which would include substantially lowered fares. "As Metro and the region continue to recover from the effects of the covid-19 pandemic, the Proposed 2023 Budget continues to invest in all-day service seven days a week that prioritizes safe, reliable, and equitable transit service," Wiedefeld declared.

The $4.46 billion proposal would include system-wide nightly rates of $2, a considerable reduction from the current rates which top out at nearly $4. The lowered fares "decrease Metro's already bleak revenue projections, but transit officials hope they would lead to permanent customer gains," states the *Post.*

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