

# Washington, DC transit system announces it will keep defective train cars out of service for the rest of 2021

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Last month, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) announced it would continue service reductions until the end of the year as it tries to address critical flaws in its 7000-series rail cars.

On October 12, WMATA, popularly known as metro, was forced to remove all of its 7000-series cars after a defect in the wheel axles causing trains' bases to widen led to several derailments in a single day. The 7000-series trains, introduced in 2015 as part of an effort to upgrade the system, represent over 60 percent of its entire fleet.

In one serious incident, which the National Transportation Safety Board director described as potentially "catastrophic," WMATA officials reported there were 200 stranded passengers on a line outside of its Arlington Cemetery station.

"The smell of burned rubber filled the cars and visibility seemed foggy onboard," one stranded passenger reported to the *Washington Post*. "There's a good amount of people in this car...every seat is taken and some people are standing, too," said another. Passengers had to be evacuated by emergency responders and walk a quarter-mile out to the nearest station exit.

The sudden loss of metro's rail cars led to "some of the most crowded rail cars and stations since the coronavirus pandemic was declared early last year," wrote the *Post* at the time.

Instead of determining the cause of the defect in the rail cars, metro has offered to simply ramp up inspections of the 7000-series cars from every 90 days to every eight days, in the hope this will be sufficient to address the safety issues. The defects themselves are

"unusual" and of an "undetermined" cause, according to the *Post*. Parts of metal from the derailment are being sent to a NTSB lab for further inspection.

Despite this, metro officials adopted a cautious tone about the potential for ramping services back up. In a statement to the *Post*, WMATA general manager Paul J. Wiedefeld said, "we'll get better and better at providing more service as we get more cars out there. But it's not going to be something that, come January 1 or whatever date, that we can say, 'Okay, well, the 7000s are back.'" Wiedefeld went further, stating that instead there will be a gradual ramping up of service leading into January.

The order to remove the rail cars from the Metro Fleet was done by the Washington Metrorail Safety Commission, a body appointed by the federal government to monitor the DC metro. When asked about the choice, safety board executive David L. Meyer told the *Post* that it was "absolutely" a "momentous decision" to end services for the 7000-series.

There has been deep concern about public trust at metro following a series of accidents relating to poor safety and maintenance. Wiedefeld himself became general manager in 2015, following the asphyxiation death of a commuter on the Yellow Line outside of L'Enfant station in downtown Washington, DC that year, with a pledge that he would put "safety first."

The head of the safety commission told the *Post* that metro was aware of the defects and had worked with car builder Kawasaki Rail Car to address the situation without notifying the safety agency. "Certainly, a widening wheel gauge problem is something that... could lead to a derailment... I would have expected this

to be escalated both within Metro and to Metro's safety oversight body."

The defects and resulting derailments and delays have raised alarms within the business establishment about the potential economic impact amid efforts to return the economy to its pre-pandemic state. Speaking for business interests, the *Post* editorial board published a comment last week calling for a "forensic accounting of what went wrong with the 7000-series trains" as well as a "culture change at metro." Without this, the newspaper proclaims, "the city's booming pre-covid economy... will continue to limp along."

In addition to the metro removal of the 7000-series, the DC region's public bus systems are dealing with a shortage of service due to a lack of workers. Chris Conklin, director of transportation for Maryland's Montgomery County, told the *Post*, "We are having challenges—just like every other organization that relies on people with commercial driver's licenses — to have the staff available to fully restore the service the way we hope to." To mitigate these deficiencies, metro announced late last month that it would reintroduce rear-door entry next year as a way of speeding up service.

Raymond Jackson, president of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 689, which represents a majority of the DC area's transit workers, told the *Post* that the problem is solely due to low wages. "I really don't think the problem is the driver shortage. I think that the problem is the wage shortage," the ATU official said.

If this is so, then the ATU itself is responsible for the unendurable working conditions within the DC transit system. Metrobus drivers start at \$20 during training and \$25.51 after graduating from its training program. This translates to average yearly earnings of roughly \$50,000, nearly \$30,000 less than the amount estimated to be needed to live "comfortably" in the DC area, according to a 2017 report by *GoBankingRates.com*. An October report by local publication WTOP found that "a two-bedroom in the District for 30% of one's gross income is doable with a salary around \$126,000, accounting for other living costs."

The ATU is perfectly content to let its members live in poverty laboring for the DC transit system and its various privatized and public operators. The ATU allowed a 2019-2020 strike over low pay at private bus operator Transdev to remain isolated for nearly four

months while its public membership in WMATA was forced to work, keeping metro in service while it scabbed on its own members.

During the COVID-19 pandemic the ATU has forced its membership to serve on the front lines. This is of a piece with the Transport Workers Union (TWU) and other unions nationally that have allowed their members to become infected on the job and die.

WMATA published its latest COVID-19 information on its website Friday, December 3, noting that there have been a total of 1,950 confirmed positive cases among workers and 7 who died from COVID-19.

In general, the Washington, DC region has also been experiencing a rise of COVID-19 cases. The current 7-day average is at 175 cases as of Tuesday, an increase of nearly double since the mid-October low of 90 cases per day.



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