

Washington D.C. metro brings back defective train cars without solution for defect that caused series of derailments

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On June 15, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), popularly known as Metro, published a press statement announcing the return of eight 7000-series railcars effective June 16.

Last fall, the system's 7000-series railcars—60 percent of metro's total fleet—were pulled from service following three derailments in one day. One derailment, which officials have said could have been much worse, left 187 people stranded between the Metro train stations of Rosslyn and Arlington Cemetery in Northern Virginia. A complete recall of its entire 7000-series railcar fleet was ordered after a wheelbase defect causing the wheels and axles to spread apart was discovered.

According to the DCist publication, the reintroduction of the newer trains “will increase service on the Blue, Orange, and Silver lines to every 15 minutes—that's better than the current trains every 20 minutes.” The publication noted ominously that the trains were returning even though “Metro has yet to identify the root cause or a permanent fix for the problem, leading some riders to question whether the cars are safe.”

Metro will be inspecting the wheels of the eight cars daily. WMATA also reported that they have a larger goal of implementing six monitoring devices across the rail network. Known as the “Automated Wayside Inspection System,” these monitors will provide feedback on the state of the car's configurations and whether or not the wheels have shown signs of spreading apart.

The plan is a rehash of a prior safety plan introduced by WMATA in December 2021 to bring these railcars back in service. In December, WMATA failed to

follow its own policies. As a result, the trains were again recalled nine days after introducing it. During an inspection, Washington Metropolitan Safety Commission spokesperson Max Smith said they caught “minuscule movements” in several wheelbases but “metro failed to take action” to halt their usage.

The announcement and return of the cars, which the *Post* declares is “a harbinger of normal service to come,” comes only a few months after Metro officials had lamented that there was no “near-term solution” to the problem.

Despite having changed nothing since the previous “metered release” of railcars, the return of the defective models was approved by the WMSC. It is a part of a much larger WMATA goal to return its whole fleet of 7000-series rail cars to service.

The lack of these railcars has negatively impacted the transit system's wait times and frustrated passengers. Currently, various Metro transit lines have a wait time of around 15-20 minutes between trains. The *Washington Post* on May 9 noted that there was an increase of complaints on “social media about crowded trains” and that this “has frustrated riders with lengthy waits for trains.”

As WMATA handles its problems in a whack-a-mole fashion, the agency is finding itself confronting an impending financial crisis as transit systems struggle to find ways to generate further funding now that the pandemic funds are drawing close to an end.

The region's major newspapers have issued a steadily-increasing drumbeat of warnings about the Metro system's financial state. A *Washington Post* editorial board statement published June 6 declares “Metro is

short on trains, drivers—and public confidence.”

The article goes on to say that “rehabilitating Metro would be a daunting enough problem were it on a sound budgetary footing.” However, “the agency is on financial life support in the form of a huge infusion of federal pandemic stimulus funds, which will start to run out next summer.” WMATA has been surviving on borrowed time from the \$768 million in stimulus funding it received from the federal government’s CARES Act in March 2020.

Speaking about worries over the agency’s financial future, Washington D.C. Metro board chairman Paul C. Smedberg stated, “Long-term, we’re going to have to have a serious discussion about the financial model—is it sustainable?” and “How are we going to fund [the system] going forward?”

The mad dash to return defective railcars to service is a piece with the subordination of health and safety to the profit system by Democratic and Republican governments alike during the pandemic. It is primarily the working class that will suffer the consequences of the attack on services that are being planned.



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