

While Wall Street claims “no money” for city’s transit workers, fire at New York’s Penn Station injures 5

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MTA and other transit workers: Tell us what conditions are like on your job. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Five workers were injured, two of them seriously, when a fire broke out overnight last Friday at New York’s Penn Station, throwing rail services into chaos ahead of the morning commute. The two most seriously injured were transported to Bellevue Hospital. Three others declined hospitalization.

The blaze began around 1:30 a.m. Friday on a maintenance vehicle operated by an Amtrak contractor just outside the Hudson River tunnels, on the western approach to the station. The contractor’s equipment was engaged in cleaning the ballast—the crushed rock that supports and stabilizes the tracks.

The New York City Fire Department deployed 46 fire trucks and 141 personnel to the scene. The fire was brought under control around 4 a.m., but Amtrak and NJ Transit service to and from Penn Station remained suspended until early afternoon due to hazardous conditions. The Long Island Rail Road briefly suspended service in both directions before resuming operations with delays and diversions.

Amtrak accepted responsibility for the incident, which is being investigated.

The incident highlights chronic underinvestment in the rail system servicing New York City, the hub of the world financial system. Penn Station is the busiest rail terminal in the United States, serving hundreds of thousands of passengers daily across Amtrak, NJ Transit and the Long Island Rail Road. Yet the Hudson River tunnels, through which Amtrak trains pass, are over a century old. This includes not only Amtrak-controlled tunnels and power systems, but also the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s (MTA) network of subway and commuter railroads.

The predawn blaze is the second major fire-related disruption at the nation’s busiest rail hub in as many weeks.

A May 14 electrical fire in a tunnel under the East River snarled rail traffic for hours, stranding thousands of commuters.

More than 40,000 New York City subway and bus workers have been working under an expired contract since May 16. The injuries on Friday are an example of the many hazards from aging and neglected infrastructure, alongside many others, from the threat of assaults to the massive death toll from COVID.

Around 3,500 Long Island Rail Road workers are also preparing to vote on a contract following the shut-down of a 3-day strike on May 18. The deal’s highest annual wage increase is only 4.5 percent, less than the metro area’s current inflation rate of 4.6 percent.

In both cases, management claims there is “no money” for even modest pay increases, insisting that any raises can only be paid for through fare hikes. The MTA’s initial “offer” to transit workers is an insulting 2 percent annual wage increase, combined with sharp hikes to out-of-pocket healthcare costs and restrictions on overtime and sick leave.

In reality, the money exists many times over but is controlled by the corporate oligarchy. Penn Station sits a few miles from Wall Street, where financial markets and stock exchanges function as a giant vacuum cleaner, sucking up the wealth produced by working people.

One transit worker told the WSWS: “We can provide service to the city but can’t afford to live and stay in the city. Most of my coworkers have to move two hours away to purchase a home.” Another added, “The claim that there is no money to meet transit workers’ demands is absurd in New York City, the center of the global economy and the richest city in the world.”

The MTA’s capital investment has been funded for decades by borrowing heavily, accumulating \$49 billion in long-term bond debt. Payments on this debt to creditors like Black Rock and Vanguard consume 15 percent of its annual operating budget.

At the federal level, the government is spending \$1 trillion annually just to finance the national debt, a figure comparable to the military budget. However, military spending is set to increase by 50 percent to \$1.5 trillion under Trump's budget proposal for next year.

"The conflict pits the working class in an exceptionally sharp form against the financial oligarchy," the *World Socialist Web Site* stressed in a statement last month. It has advised workers to prepare for a struggle by building networks of rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers and independent of union officials, who are joined at the hip with management and the two corporate parties. Rank-and-file committees, the WSWS stressed, will "prepare for the fight on their own terms—maintain control over decisions, block sellouts by the union bureaucracy and mobilize the broadest possible support throughout the working class."

Long-distance rail in the United States is barely functional. The Northeast Corridor—the busiest, most economically vital rail artery in the country—runs on infrastructure that, in some stretches, dates to the nineteenth century.

Amtrak has long acknowledged an \$11.6 billion backlog for basic infrastructure projects and a further \$26.5 billion backlog for broader improvements. Amtrak has never been adequately funded by Congress. Its entire existence has been on a managed decline.

Superstorm Sandy in 2012 damaged tunnels on both sides of Manhattan. On the East River side, Amtrak began long-planned repairs in 2025—work that has kept one of the four tunnels out of service and is not expected to be completed until at least the end of 2027. The system is already operating at reduced capacity on multiple fronts simultaneously.

On the Hudson River side, critical repairs have remained stalled until the new Gateway tunnels are constructed, which will allow existing tunnels to be taken out of service for a full rebuild. Amid decades of delay, the Trump administration recently slowed the Gateway project further by freezing federal funding for the Gateway project—a freeze only partially reversed after New York and New Jersey filed suit and a federal judge ordered the funds restored.

Reports emerged earlier this year that Trump offered to lift the freeze entirely if congressional Democrats agreed to rename Penn Station after him. The White House denied the ultimatum but did not deny the discussions.

[8 billion in funding for renovation of Penn Station. Money being directed to firms with personal connections to Trump. While renovated station will not, as of now, bear his name, architectural renderings prominently

display Trump's presidential seal on wall.]

[Not limited to Trump but Democratic Party, no less agent of Wall Street. NYC governor Kathy Hochul, who controls MTA as state agency, attacked LIRR workers as "reckless." Mamdani, member of DSA elected because of mass opposition to inequality, quickly abandoned his proposal for free bus fare. Instead, MTA stepping up police "fare enforcements." Also quietly shelved plans for Queenslink, expanding subway service through long-abandoned LIRR right of way to provide north-south subway service in the borough.]

The injuries suffered by five workers on Friday morning are a direct indictment of the conditions under which transit workers are compelled to work: aging equipment, deferred maintenance, contractor arrangements that diffuse accountability and a relentless culture of cost-cutting that places the balance sheet above human safety.

The resources to build and maintain a world-class public transit system exist. They are concentrated in the hands of the financial oligarchy rather than directed toward social need because the capitalist system is not organized around social need—it is organized around profit.

Safe transportation, like safe healthcare and safe housing, is a social right. Securing it requires not appeals to management or petitions to politicians who represent the same financial interests—but the independent political mobilization of the working class against the system that produces these conditions.



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