“This should never have happened”: New York City transit workers speak out on death of subway conductor Moet McCullum

Our reporters
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In the late evening of September 3, Moet McCullum, a 41-year-old New York City Transit (NYCT) subway conductor was struck and killed by a southbound D train in a tunnel near the 161st Street station in the south Bronx. McCullum was a mother of three and had only been working for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) for 11 months.

The day she was killed, she had been working on the tracks as part of her extra duties as a construction flagger. Construction flaggers protect track crews by setting out lights and portable warning devices, signaling approaching train operators that workers are ahead.

McCullum’s death comes as more than 40,000 MTA workers represented by Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 have been working under an expired contract since May 15. New York’s Taylor Law prohibits public employees from striking, penalizing strikers two days’ pay for every day out and exposing unions to suspension of dues checkoff. Local 100 has continued negotiations and rallies; on September 8 it said the MTA was demanding givebacks while offering annual raises of only 2 percent.

In the past decade, two other deaths have occurred under nearly identical circumstances. In 2023, Hilarion Joseph, also flagger, was struck and killed by a train near the 34th Street-Herald Square station. In 2016, flagger Louis Gray Jr. was killed by a G train in Brooklyn, while he and his colleague, Jeffrey Fleming, were placing warning lights in the tunnel. Fleming survived the incident but incurred severe injuries and lifelong trauma.

Working conditions for transit workers are becoming more and more dangerous each year. In 2023, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) found 38 near misses involving NYCT track workers in 2023. This was up 58 percent from the prior year and up 65 percent from 2021. A 2007 *New York Times* report stated that at least 238 New York City Transit (NYCT, which is operated by the MTA) workers had been killed on the job since 1946, with at least 150 of those deaths were workers being struck by trains. By 2023, the MTA said 175 employees had died of COVID-19.

Reductions in MTA staff have taken place since the outbreak of the pandemic, particularly those in subway and track maintenance. The MTA-NYCT end-of-year report for 2024 revealed that there were 1,394 maintenance vacancies, 7.2 percent below what had been budgeted.

Efforts are already underway by the media to pin the blame for McCullum’s death solely on the employee who was operating the train. The *New York Daily News* published an article immediately following McCullum’s death which bore the headline “Subway operator who struck and killed Bronx trackworker was going full speed despite warning.”

In the past several years, transit workers have also faced increasing new dangers in the subway stations arising from a social catastrophe of mass homelessness, untreated mental illness, drug addiction, poverty and destitution—all produced by the systematic gutting of essential social services. The ruling class has responded to this crisis with law-and-order campaigns, ramping up policing and militarization within the transit system. The policing buildup began in 2019 under Governor Andrew Cuomo and continued under Governor Kathy Hochul and Mayor Eric Adams.

The NYPD Transit Bureau already had roughly 2,500 officers in 2019, with additional deployments and overtime patrols added since then. In 2024, Governor Kathy Hochul sent 750 National Guard troops and 250 New York State Police and MTA Police personnel into the subway system.

WSWS reporters spoke to MTA New York City Transit workers at the Coney Island, Stillwell Avenue subway Station in Brooklyn last weekend. Nearly all of the workers interviewed had been aware of McCullum’s killing and denounced the conditions which lead to her death as entirely avoidable. Employees spoke in detail about the routine hazards of their work, widely citing faulty radios, poor

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staffing, communication problems and vulnerability to crime as the most common obstacles to their daily safety.

While workers acknowledged the responsibility of the operator on duty at the time of McCullum's killing, their comments revealed broader systemic issues.

"It is terrible," one train conductor said of McCullum's death. "Nobody should have to face that. There is so much unnecessary risk every day."

He commented on the role of the police in stations, saying that while they were present, their priority was not to keep workers safe. "Conductors see dangers from the increasing problems in the stations—homelessness and poverty. They have cops stationed, but they're not protecting us.

"Our radios are terrible. They go in and out and lose signal all the time. It's incredibly dangerous," he continued.

One train operator contested the idea that a single driver was responsible for the accident that killed McCullum. "They say that the train operator was [at fault], but we are all responsible for each other's safety. Why wasn't a 'stop-service' called on that train that hit her??"

A conductor, who had also worked as a flagger for three years, spoke with WSWS reporters about staffing that leads to increased risk for accidents.

"They keep putting younger and more untrained workers in the most dangerous positions. New employees have to know what they are signing up for. But nobody should have to show up to work every day and take on that kind of risk. This should never have happened."

Another conductor, who had also worked as a flagger, described in detail the process by which workers are selected for the most hazardous jobs. "Track work is by far the most dangerous in the field because anything can go wrong," he said. "Flagging is the most dangerous track assignment you could have. As a conductor, you often have additional responsibilities. Some of those you can select, but some of those you get drafted for, including track jobs."

He continued, "When I did flagging, I didn't choose it. I was drafted for it. And I think that this shouldn't be a job that anybody is forced to do. Employees who don't want to be doing that type of work will inevitably do a worse job at it, and therefore, it will be more dangerous for everyone.

"I also heard about the faulty radios. That's a big problem," he said. "Everything that goes wrong is all about money. They want to save here and there, and cut this and cut that and do it more efficiently. But then it is more dangerous for all of us. We should go after the state government for that."

Aziz, a road car inspector, spoke about the political issues behind the hazards faced by transit workers in New York City.

"The incident that killed Moet McCullum is absolutely awful. We should not be exposed to such risks in our daily lives. Things like this happens because we are facing increasing dangers each day.

"My number one concern is safety and security when I am working in the stations. There is a growing problem of homelessness and vandalism, and while I am very sympathetic to these issues, it also poses a huge risk to our safety. We need to be safe. We should be protected all the time.

"The political right wing has denounced Mamdani as a socialist and communist. But I don't think that socialism and communism are bad words, and we should not be afraid of such ideas. I tell this to my children as well. I want them to know that socialism is OK."

Aziz was not aware that Mamdani had recently blocked legislation that would have provided bonus checks to city paraprofessional educators, citing the anti-strike Taylor Law, or that he had fired Haitian Temporary Protected Status city employees. When the WSWS reporter spoke about the recent policies of the Mamdani administration, he was shocked.

"I absolutely did not know that Mamdani had done this. This is very significant, and I thank you for telling me."

Another employee who learned of the Mamdani administration's recent invocation of the Taylor Law denounced it. "The Taylor Law should have never been signed, even if it was all the way back in 1967. We don't currently have a contract, and we can't even go on strike.

"When Mamdani first got elected, I supported him. I thought, 'give him a chance.' But it's becoming clear that he is a wolf in sheep's clothing."

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