

Robert Luden's death in Metro-North track accident has top union seeking changes

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The death of Metro-North worker Robert Luden, fatally struck by a train sent down a track that was supposed to be off limits, has the commuter rail's top unions calling for oversight of an inexperienced workforce lacking the veteran leadership to prevent tragedies like the one that killed the beloved track worker.

In a letter to Metro-North president Howard Permut, Anthony Bottalico blasted Metro-North management for failing to heed calls to train and replace the vast numbers of workers who will retire this year.

"Managers and employees alike see no leadership on this railroad," Bottalico, the general chairman of the Association of Commuter Rail Employees (ACRE) wrote in a letter sent to Permut last week that was obtained by Newsday.

"The loss of thousands of years of experience is something we have all warned about for years," Bottalico added. "I regret not sending this six months ago. Our employees and managers tell me they see a railroad in dysfunction, a railroad more concerned with budgets and long meetings and no attention to actual management of the operations."

Metro-North expects to lose 10 percent of its 6,000-member workforce to retirement this year as workers become pension-eligible for the first time, 30 years after the railroad's 1983 start. Permut has called the hemorrhaging of talent, which cuts across every level of railroad operations, one of his biggest challenges.

Metro-North says it's moving quickly to fill senior-level vacancies and recently brought in a private firm to conduct a complete evaluation of how the railroad inspects and maintains its tracks.

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"We have every confidence that our leadership team at Metro-North is a strong one and fully committed to the work ahead," spokeswoman Marjorie Anders said. "Finally, the railroad has and

will continue to work closely with our partners in this process - our employees and the leadership of the labor organizations that represent the workforce."

VETERAN WORKER 'LOVED TEACHING YOUNGER GENERATION'

On May 28, Luden was working on track east of a station under construction in West Haven, Conn., when he was hit by a train that, sources say, was mistakenly sent down his track.

The flow of trains is overseen by railway traffic controllers stationed at Metro-North's hub in Grand Central Terminal. Both workers on the shift when Luden, 52, died have been suspended without pay pending the outcome of an investigation by the MTA Police and the National Transportation Safety Board, a source said.

The controller who sent the train down the track had relatively little experience and was being supervised by a veteran worker when the accident occurred, railroad sources explained. The more senior controller had temporarily left his post, leaving the younger worker in charge, sources said.

"When he came back and saw what happened he collapsed," the railroad source said.

Ironically, Luden's friends recall a 27-year veteran track foreman eager to help younger employees learn the ways of a railroad job that could turn deadly in an instant. In recent weeks he had worked around the clock to rebuild tracks along the New Haven Line after a New Haven-bound train derailed and collided with an oncoming train, injuring 70 people.

"Luden was the type of guy who loved teaching the younger generation the right way to work such a job as we do," colleague John Thomas Kelly wrote on his Facebook page. "He also was more like a big brother or father figure to many young guys including myself."

'HOPEFULLY BOBBY'S DEATH WILL BE A WAKE UP CALL'

Luden was a Navy veteran who'd served on a destroyer in Hawaii, according to his obituary. The married father of two, whose co-workers nicknamed him "Babaloo," was remembered at a funeral Mass on Monday at St. Clare Roman Catholic Church near his East Haven, Conn., home.

Among the mourners was Chris Silvera, the head of Luden's track workers union, who said he hoped the railroad would learn a lesson from his friend's death.

"Hopefully Bobby's death will be a wake up call and we're going to wake up and be better at what we are doing so it doesn't happen again," said Silvera, the secretary-treasurer of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 808.

"It was a rookie that made a mistake," Silvera said. "We are a very young workforce, a very inexperienced workforce. We're used to having people with 15, 16 years of experience doing these jobs. We're not able to do that anymore. When you've got all rookies on the team you have to have leadership."

UNION: RECRUIT MORE SEASONED WORKERS

Aside from greater oversight, Bottalico's letter calls for so-called shunting devices to be used on the rails. The safety devices interrupt electrical current on rail lines, sending a warning signal to an engineer that someone is working on the tracks ahead.

"We demand immediate increased oversight and additional protective measures," Bottalico wrote.

Moreover, he said the railroad needs to recruit more seasoned workers in its operations department, which controls the movement of trains on the rails at Grand Central.

"Words will not fix our problems anymore, nor will statistics on hiring," Bottalico said.

"What was the most confident workforce is now in shambles and distrusting," Bottalico continued. "We know we all must be even more alert and more diligent than ever before, and we tell our members that every day. ... This railroad has always been a family, a family that cares too much to ignore the cracks in our foundation.

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