



Editorial

Safety Board's Conclusion of Amtrak #188 Wreck is Flawed

Railroad Workers United has a different take on the causes behind the crash of Amtrak #188 outside of Philadelphia just over a year ago. On May 17th, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) issued an official statement regarding the May 12th, 2015 wreck of that train. The Board flatly states that the cause of the wreck was *distraction* of the train's engineer, Brandon Bostian, prior to the crash. The evidence for this is circumstantial at best and lacks any scientific basis.

The NTSB points to the radio communications that took place as evidence that the crash resulted from operator distraction. While this might be a legitimate theory, railroad engineers and conductors are routinely forced to multi-task and divide their attention to a myriad of ongoing and often rapidly changing circumstances. It is not unusual for there to be numerous radio transmissions over short periods of time while the engineer is operating a train. Railroad operating personnel are constantly dealing with "distractions"; e.g. fog, snow and rain; trespassers and passing trains; vehicles at road crossings, temporary slow orders, track work gangs, dispatcher inquiries; conductor directives and more, all while operating the locomotive. This theory is certainly not without problems.

There is another theory, one that is at least as legitimate. That is, that Amtrak #188 was hit by a projectile, smashing the locomotive's windshield, and rendering engineer Bostian temporarily disabled and incapable of controlling the train. There is at least as much circumstantial evidence upon which to base this theory as there is to base the NTSB's "distraction" theory upon.

- In the minutes leading up to the crash of Amtrak #188, two other trains had been hit by projectiles in this same vicinity. One of which had its windshield shattered by the projectile.
- Following the crash, the locomotive was found with a grapefruit sized smash in the engineer's windshield, possibly the result of a projectile hitting Bostian's train.
- Engineer Bostian emerged uninjured except for a gash on his forehead. This injury could have been somehow related to the projectile hitting the locomotive's windshield.

For the NTSB to discount this theory and to go with the distraction theory is sheer speculation on its part. In either case, there is no hard and fast scientific evidence to prove which more closely approximates the truth of the matter. By going with the "distraction" theory, the NTSB is vilifying an engineer – one who was considered by all who knew him as a safety conscious and professional employee – and rendering him guilty until proven innocent, based upon conjecture.

Regardless, we must also remember to look at the bigger picture, the context within which the wreck took place. Had that section of track been protected by Positive Train Control (PTC) or even a simple off-the-shelf *train control* system in the east-bound direction, the wreck probably could not have taken place. However, the NTSB's calls for PTC installation over the past three decades have yielded few results to date. And the original deadline for PTC installation (December 31st, 2015) has now been extended yet another 3 to 5 years. Budget cuts at Amtrak rendered the company incapable of full installation of PTC at the time of the wreck, while the nation's freight rail



carriers have been dragging their feet on PTC installation.

And if one buys into the distraction theory, then we must consider the recent changes (implemented just weeks prior to the wreck) to Amtrak engineers' and trainmen's work schedules that allow far less "down time" between runs and how these changes could have affected the engineer's ability to cope with the situation at hand that day. The schedules of all railroad operating personnel in the U.S. and Canada are notoriously harsh, subjecting them to chronic fatigue, irregular sleep patterns, and a general lack of time away from the workplace. Amtrak's recent work schedule changes had made a bad situation worse.

Then there if the question of a single employee in the cab of the locomotive. While the NTSB claims that it was "likely" the radio chatter and distraction that was the cause of the wreck, NTSB's recommendation advises recurrent training for engineers to help them better manage the multitude of tasks when operating a train. But the NTSB completely ignores the fact that there was a single employee alone in the cab, with no one to assist him in what was – according to the NTSB – a "distracting" situation. It is worth noting that in the four most high profile passenger train wrecks in recent years, *ALL* of them had just one employee alone in the cab of the locomotive (Chatsworth, CA 2008; Spuyten Duyvil, NY 2013; Northwestern Spain 2013; and Frankfurt Junction 2015). And it is quite likely that *ALL* of them could have been prevented had there been two in the cab. To the discredit of the NTSB, this subject was not broached.

With all of the other factors that come into play concerning this ordeal, it is absurd for the NTSB to single out the train engineer's supposed and unproven distraction as being the outstanding factor in the causation of the wreck of Amtrak #188. It is sheer speculation, based upon strictly circumstantial evidence, and ignores a whole host of other factors that deserve a hearing. In short, the NTSB does not have any hard and fast scientific evidence. Unless and until it does, it would be better for the NTSB to simply state that it does not know *exactly* what happened. For the moment, we agree with the dissenting member of the NTSB, Vice chair person Bella Dinh-Zarr, and like her, ask: "Why does our probable cause focus on a human's mistake and what he may have been distracted by?" Like with any train wreck, we must remember to look at the big picture.