

Opinion & Commentary

Why There Are Train Wrecks ... and How to Prevent Them

On May 12th, Amtrak Train #188 derailed at Frankfurt Junction just east of Philadelphia, PA. Since then, we have been subject to endless speculation as the official investigation into the cause of the derailment continues apace. Those of us in the rail industry anxiously await the findings. Meantime, regardless of what the NTSB, the FBI and other government agencies discover and conclude about the tragic wreck, there are a number of facts that we believe are worth considering.

1 – It is roundly agreed by railroad executives, union officials and industry insiders that had Positive Train Control (PTC) been in place and in effect on this section of track, the wreck would more than likely not have been possible. PTC would have resulted in a train brake application in order to slow the train, recognizing that its speed was excessive and therefore unable to negotiate the curve ahead. PTC has been mandated by Congress, but its complete implementation has been delayed on the Northeast Corridor (NEC) and elsewhere for a myriad of reasons. In Amtrak's case, one reason being a lack of adequate funding from Congress.

2 – Amtrak has been underfunded for decades and forced to scrape by, cutting corners and deferring maintenance, ever under the microscope by a budget cutting Congress more concerned with ideological and political expediency than with safety and security. On the busy Northeast Corridor where the wreck took place, Amtrak faces a backlog of drastically needed repairs, estimated at \$4.3 billion over the next 45 years.

3 – In a cost-cutting measure on March 23rd, six weeks prior to the wreck, Amtrak unilaterally implemented a new scheduling arrangement for NEC train & engine crews over the vehement objections of its operating craft unions. The new schedules – intended to save \$3 million by reducing layovers – were condemned by both unions as a disaster in the making. Amtrak scrapped a proven scheduling system for NEC crews that had been in effect, with little modification, for decades (See Page 4). Prior to March 23rd, schedules adhered to the 90-minute layover minimum and provided additional time for difficult runs. Now, not only has the 90-minute layover been scrapped, but crews have no guarantee of any break whatsoever. Also, crews now may have varying on-duty time each workday, and these start times may now be any time of the day! (Note: the engineer of Train #188 had experienced a non-routine westbound trip earlier that day, causing delays to his train, thereby shortening up an already diminished layover).

4 – Basic “Train Control” technology has existed for nearly a century that can assist in preventing accidents such as this one. As with the wreck at Spuyten Duyvil, NY on the Metro North railroad 12/1/13, a simple transponder could have easily been located west of the curve that would have prevented the train from entering it at such an excess speed. This being one of the tightest and most restricted curves on the corridor, it seems an appropriate location for such a life-saving device.

5 – Amtrak Train #188, operated by a lone engineer, entered the permanent speed restriction at the curve, way too fast. Whether it was fatigue, the result of a projectile that hit the train (and possibly the engineer), inattentiveness, or other factors at play, despite the investigation, we may never know.

But we do know this: had there been a second crew member in the cab of the locomotive that day, it is very likely that such an additional crew member would have taken action to prevent the wreck that – for *whatever* reason – the engineer was not able to. (Note: commercial airliners routinely have two qualified and certified crew members in the cockpit. Perhaps trains should be operated similarly).

In the past seven years we have witnessed a series of tragic train wrecks, all of which have resulted in countless injuries and loss of life. Four wrecks – Chatsworth, CA (9/12/08); Lac Megantic, Quebec (7/6/13); Spuyten-Duyvil, NY (12/1/13); and now Frankfurt Junction, PA (5/12/15) have all been attributed to some form of “operator error”. (Note: There is one factor that *all* four of these incidents had in common; i.e. the employee in question was working *alone* in the cab of the locomotive or was the *lone* crew member). While operator error may in fact have played a role, simply pointing the finger at the worker does little or nothing to assist in understanding why the error was made in the first place; nor does it help us to prevent similar such wrecks in the future. Since workers are human beings and as such, are prone to make mistakes (regardless of how many rules are written up, what discipline may be threatened, or how many observation cameras may be pointed in their direction), we must implement safety features and backups that take this reality into account.

Railroad Workers United believes that a series of simple common-sense applications would go a long way to preventing devastating train wrecks in the future. These include:

- 1 – The application of Positive Train Control (PTC) as soon as possible on major rail routes.
- 2 – In the meantime, application of off-the-shelf readily available “automatic train control” technology at critical locations where passenger trains are particularly vulnerable.
- 3 – A minimum of two qualified employees – at least one certified locomotive engineer and one certified train conductor – on each and every train.
- 4 – A guarantee of adequate and proper rest, together with reasonable attendance policies and provisions for necessary time off work, for all train and engine employees.
- 5 – Limiting the length and tonnage of freight trains to a reasonable and manageable level.
- 6 – The implementation of safety programs on all railroads that focus on hazard identification and elimination, rather than simply focus on worker behavior.
- 7 – Strengthening of OSHA “whistleblower” and other laws to empower employees to report injuries, workplace hazards and safety violations without fear of company reprisal.

If we are serious about preventing future catastrophes of this nature, we must equip railroad workers with the necessary tools – including but not limited to those outlined above – to enable them to perform the job safely. Pointing fingers at this or that employee (at any level in the company, union or management) might make some folks feel better, but it does little or nothing to prevent future accidents. Railroad Workers United believes it is time we learn from these terrible tragedies and get serious about implementing the necessary measures to ensure safe railroad operations.