CSX workers killed by Amtrak train had no time to react, no chance to escape

WASHINGTON — Two CSX conductors struck and killed by an Amtrak train last month in Ivy City were just a few hundred feet from safely getting back onto their freight train when they were killed, a preliminary report from the National Transportation Safety Board said Tuesday.

Two Amtrak engineers — one going in each direction — said they started sounding their horns when they saw the CSX workers on the tracks on June 27. The two trains passed the workers at nearly the same time, and would not have had any way to directly communicate with the CSX crew. The train closest to the freight tracks — southbound train 175 to Union Station — struck the conductor and conductor trainee.

A CSX supervisor was just across the tracks from the crash, because he had just driven to the location to help troubleshoot the train issues that had been flagged by an automated defect detector.

The CSX train had stopped and the conductor and conductor trainee had gotten off to inspect those potential defects.

Jake Lafave, 25, and Stephen Deal, 20, had just completed their check and were walking back to the locomotive at 11:18 p.m. They only made it back to the first railcar — about 350 feet from the locomotive — before they were struck.

“As they approached the front of the locomotive, the walking space between CSX track 2 and Amtrak track 3 narrowed,” according to the preliminary NTSB report.

Two CSX-owned tracks (1 and 2) run parallel to the two Amtrak-owned-and-operated tracks (3 and 4) in that stretch. With the front of the CSX train on the track closest to the Amtrak lines and Amtrak trains going by on the other two tracks, Lafave and Deal would have had little if any safe area to escape to on that side of the freight train.
“They were struck by Amtrak train 175 that was traveling about 73 mph on Amtrak’s track 3,” the report said.


No radio frequency for CSX crew to warn Amtrak they were on DC track

By Max Smith | @amaxsmith June 29, 2017 4:55 am

WASHINGTON — Two CSX conductors struck and killed by an Amtrak train Tuesday night could not have directly warned the Amtrak engineer that they were on the tracks since CSX and Amtrak operate on different radio frequencies, a union representative said.

The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating the crash, which happened around 11:30 p.m. Tuesday in the Ivy City area. The CSX freight train out of Baltimore had stopped so the crew could investigate a possible wheel problem, and the conductors apparently mistakenly stepped, without proper protections in place, from the two CSX-owned tracks closest to a Metro rail yard into the path of trains on one of the two parallel Amtrak-owned tracks closer to New York Avenue.

Amtrak Train 175, coming from Boston, struck and killed the two conductors. National Transportation Safety Board Member Earl Weener said Wednesday afternoon that it does not appear anyone else was hurt.

Herbert Harris, D.C.’s state representative for the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, said Amtrak engineers have their own radio frequency to communicate with the Union Station terminal and get other instructions along the Northeast Corridor, while CSX has a separate radio system.

“So there wouldn’t have been any interactional communication between the crews unless CSX had notified either Amtrak or possibly the tower in Union Station that they had a crew that was either on the ground or had a train with a problem, and that may very well be one of the issues that they look into: the communication with who, and what
if any notification had been given," Harris said. He represents Amtrak and commuter locomotive engineers.

Weener confirmed communication between, and with, CSX and Amtrak dispatchers is one focus of the investigations.

Communication failures contributed to a more serious Amtrak crash near Philadelphia last year that killed two Amtrak workers, but those problems with work zone protections appear to be different from potential issues tied to this crash.

 Witnesses and others involved in Tuesday night’s crash are being interviewed by the NTSB. The crash stopped train service in and out of Union Station much of Wednesday morning.

While CSX and Amtrak are separate railroads, in this area the tracks are right next to each other with no barrier.

“That’s not uncommon, that you have two rail systems parallel to each other. That happens in a lot of locations, and particularly in metropolitan areas,” Harris said. “Every operating train crew … is required to be qualified on the physical territory and geography of the area that they operate in.”

One of the two CSX conductors was on the freight train learning about the layout of the tracks in the area to qualify to work on the route, Weener said.

The union has pushed for D.C. to establish and fund an independent rail safety oversight agency that would allow the District to have its own experts respond to incidents like this one, or the 2015 CSX derailment near the Rhode Island Avenue Metro station.


NTSB investigating after 2 CSX workers fatally struck by Amtrak train

By Jack Moore June 28, 2017 1:00 pm
WASHINGTON — The two CSX workers fatally struck by Amtrak train just north of Union Station late Tuesday night had exited the stopped freight train to check out a technical issue when they were hit by the passenger train, the National Transportation Safety Board said Wednesday.

The fatal collision led to suspended service, delays and disruptions on both the Amtrak and MARC lines into Wednesday morning. Amtrak restored service shortly before 9 a.m. with trains operating at reduced speeds near the crash site. MARC announced the Penn and Camden lines would operate full service Wednesday afternoon along the entire routes after the earlier disruptions, with some minor delays possible on the Penn line because of refueling.

The NTSB is still investigating what led to the accident.

“We have few definitive facts at this early stage,” NTSB board member Earl Weener said during a news conference Wednesday afternoon.

The CSX train was heading toward Union Station from Baltimore Tuesday night when an automatic alert indicated a problem with one or more of the train’s wheels, Weener said. Dispatch prompted the crew to stop the train and check it out and both the train’s conductor and a conductor being qualified on that route exited the train, he said.

At some point before 11:30 p.m., the two workers crossed over on to an adjacent track that was “active” where they were struck by a southbound Amtrak train that had originated in Boston. A CSX engineer who remained on the freight train was not harmed.

The names of the two workers who were fatally struck have not yet been released by authorities.

NTSB investigators are collecting evidence from the tracks, analyzing camera footage and data recorders, and interviewing witnesses, Weener said.

The accident occurred near New York Avenue and 9th Street in Northeast D.C. where there are four parallel tracks — two owned by CSX and two owned by Amtrak.

The stopped CSX train and the seven-car Amtrak train were on adjacent tracks when the accident occurred, Weener said.

The speed limit in that area is 95 mph but closer to Union Station, it slows to 30 mph.

Weener said he couldn’t say whether the conductor of the Amtrak saw the two workers before the collision.

“We are in the process of downloading cameras so we would be able to see what was visible out of the cab as well as what would be visible inside the cab,” he said.
Amtrak trains did not operate during the Wednesday morning rush hour between D.C. and Philadelphia because the tracks were closed as authorities investigated. Service was restored shortly before 9 a.m. at a reduced speed of 10 mph.

Earlier Wednesday, commuters who use MARC faced disruptions and extensive delays on the Penn and Camden lines Wednesday morning.