Amtrak #501 Derails in DuPont, WA - Yet Another Avoidable Wreck

In the days after the wreck of Amtrak Train #501, de- 
ailing on a curve outside of DuPont, WA on Monday, 
December 18th, killing 3 and injuring scores of others, 
the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) an-
nounced that the train was exceeding the proscribed 
speed limit for the curve, rated at 30 mph. Coming on 
the heels of at least five major passenger train wrecks 
in the U.S. over the course of the last decade, this 
latest wreck begs the question, why do these trage-
dies continue to occur?

Train wrecks are no different than most disasters in 
that they are often the result of a constellation of fac-
tors, many hidden from view, and often years in the 
making. We miss the point when we simply pinpoint 
the worker who “screwed up” and fail to further scruti-
nize the situation. Most – if not all – of these factors 
are sometimes hidden from view of the average 
worker, who usually has little or no control over any of 
them. These factors have to do with corporate and 
government policy, and include, but are not limited to: 
poor work schedules, chronic fatigue, limited time off 
work, inadequate staffing, lack of training, lack of ad-
equate qualifying task overload, deferred mainte-
nance, antiquated infrastructure, failure to implement 
available safety technology, and the list goes on and 
on. It is almost never just one of these, but some very 
complex array of procedural and policy failures that – 
when taken together – can result in disaster.

Training, Rest, Qualifying

The first place to look to better understand what 
might have gone wrong is to see if the train’s crew 
was properly trained, and had in their grasp the “technical proficiency” to carry out the job safely and 
efficiently. Was the train crew provided with a sched-
ule that ensured adequate rest and time off the job? 
Finally, is the question of “qualification.” All conduc-
tors and engineers must – by law and company policy 
– be “qualified” on the physical characteristics over 
which they operate their trains. Once technically 
“qualified” – and this is crucial - crews should now be 
familiar “with this territory. From what we have 
learned from preliminary reports, the crews were 
“group” qualified in a very unprofessional and slip-
shod manner which failed to render crews “familiar.”

John Risch, the national Legislative Director for the 
SMART Transportation Division, a rail union made up 
of engineers and trainmen, including Amtrak conduc-
tors, believes that, “All the railroads in the country, 
including Amtrak, do not require training like they 
should. Time and time again we have urged the rail-
roads to allow more training trips before they go out, 
and they will say one or two trips is enough. It’s a cost 
issue … This is something that has been a problem.”

Adequate and Proper Staffing

The major passenger train wrecks in the past decade in 
the United States include Metrolink #111 at Chats-
worth, CA (2008); Metro-North #186 at Spuyten Duy-
vil, NY (2013); Amtrak #188 at Frankford Junction, PA (2015); New Jersey Transit Train #1614 at Hoboken, NJ (2016); and now this week’s crash of Amtrak #501 at DuPont, WA (2017). Worthy of note in all five crash-
es is the fact that there was a lone operator in the cab of 
the locomotive. (Note: In addition, the worst freight 
train disaster in the history of Canada – M&M&A Train 
#2 at Lac-Mégantic, QC in 2013 - was likewise in the 
charge of a single crew member). While the rail indus-
try and its allies may discount this fact, it obviously 
raises a question worthy of further consideration and investi-
gation. Passenger jet airliners have two qualified and 
certified operators in the cockpit. Is it not time to con-
sider that passenger trains might also require such 
staffing? (Note: In the case of the recent crash in 
Washington state, there was a second employee in the 
cab. But ironically, not only was this employee not a 
crew member and not qualified on the physical 
characteristics and therefore not aware of the upcom-
ing speed restriction, his presence in the cab was 
potentially distracting to an engineer who himself was 
apparently poorly qualified and unfamiliar with the 
territory).

Train Control Technology

Following the Chatsworth wreck in 2008, Congress passed the Rail Safety Improvement Act (RSIA) which among other things, mandated that a sizable percentage of US rail trackage – including those tracks which were used by passenger trains – must be protected by a tech-
ology known as Positive Train Control (PTC) by the end of 2015. While the rail carriers drugged their feet on implementation, the num-
ber of potentially preventable wrecks have added up in recent years. Then in December of 2015, the rail carriers literally threatened to shut down operations (and hence the country) if they were not granted an extension. Congress acted, and extended the deadline to the end of 
2018, with possible extensions for yet another two years! Could many, 
most, or all of these wrecks have been prevented had PTC been in 
place? There is of course no way to know, but given the consensus on 
it’s capabilities, quite likely. But ironically, with or without PTC, off-the-
shelf technologies known collectively as Automatic Train Control (ATC) 
has existed for a century, and is very effective at preventing such acci-
dents like the one at DuPont, WA. In bygone days, it protected thou-
sands of miles of mainline trackage in the U.S. but in recent decades 
has mostly been ripped out by rail carriers as a “cost-saving” measu-
re.

Lack of Infrastructural Commitment

Today, railroads around the world have been making significant ad-
ances in efficiency, safety, and general infrastructure. Not so in the U.S. Railroads have a history of operating on a shoestring and yet, for the last 100 years, the U.S. has been a leader in the development and imple-
mentation of technologies like the one at DuPont, WA. One bygone day, it protected thou-
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ure.

Conclusion

The wreck on December 18th of Amtrak train #501 is yet another ex-
ample of a needless tragedy, that has been – like others before it – in 
incubation, years in the making due to a myriad of irresponsible and 
reckless actions and attitudes on the part of the rail carriers, federal 
regulators, and Congress. While we might respect the expert analysis 
and conclusion of the NTSB, due in the coming months and years, we 
understand and appreciate the fact that the agency is limited to a 
tactical analysis of the latest wreck. Larger questions of ideology, poli-
cy, economics and politics generally do not enter that agency’s equa-

tion when attempting to analyze the cause of this or that specific train 
week. But as railroad workers, we are free of those constraints, and 
as a result, have a more unobstructed view of the bigger picture. Rank 
& files experience day-in-and-day-out the carriers’ cynical view of safety, the push for profit, the demand for increased stock prices, the budget cutting, the recklessness, the total disregard for workers’ lives.

THIS is why Train #501 wrecked. THIS is why we continue to have 
Chatsworths, Lac-Mégantic, Frankfort Junctions, and all the rest. It is 
time our society make a real commitment to modern, green, efficient, 
and safe rail transportation, and do what it takes to achieve it.