New Jersey Transit Blames its Overworked Engineers for Commuter Woes

Dozens of commuter trains on the New Jersey Transit (NJT) system were cancelled over the course of the summer because of a shortage of locomotive engineers, a problem that has been developing and growing for years now. The shortage is apparently due to a combination of factors which the company has known about and has chosen to ignore. A large number of vacancies created by retirements and resignations, together with an under-investment in training for new engineers over the last decade, combined with a spate of engineer mark-offs, led NJT to cancel dozens of trains during peak periods, some with little or no notice to commuters.

In response, New Jersey Transportation Commissioner Diane Gutierrez-Scaccetti said that in addition to seeking residency waivers that would allow non-New Jersey residents to assume these positions, NJT would actively promote vocational training programs for engineers at community colleges, and would offer bonuses to NJT conductors if they train to be engineers.

But according to union sources, the root of the problem has more to do with the low rate of pay relative to other area engineers. Apparently, conductors and engineers have been leaving NJT in recent years and assuming better paying jobs at other railroads in the region.

NJT Executive Director Kevin Corbett acknowledged that the carrier “has been losing engineers, to retirement and other railroads with higher pay, much faster than it has replaced them.” That failure has left the railroad with a shortage of some 50 engineers. Such a shortage is acute, particularly in the summer, leading to the current crisis.

According to James P. Brown, BLET General Chairman, "We have an extra list, but they're all working just about every day. They're working like crazy." And even Corbett admits that engineers “have been beaten down for years; they've been bearing the brunt of understandably frustrated commuters.”

Nevertheless, in a classic display of “blame-the-worker” for the debacle, NJT management has opted to finger “irresponsible” engineers who mark off. “The majority of engineers are good people. Many put in overtime,” Corbett stated. He continued, “It is the unscheduled absences. That is the problem.” As if the shortage of more than four dozen engineers, leaving those remaining “turning and burning”, was somehow not the real cause of the train delays and cancellations.

Meanwhile, an internal union struggle is being waged in the engineers’ union at NJT. RWU hopes to issue a full report sometime this Fall.