

# A second “summer of hell” for riders of New Jersey Transit

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Last year, commuters who rely on New Jersey Transit braced for what New York Governor Andrew Cuomo predicted would be a “summer of hell” because of track replacements at New York’s Penn Station, a central hub for New Jersey as well as New York mass transit. The summer of 2017, and the months since then, have been nothing less than a slow-motion collapse of the transportation infrastructure in the New York metropolitan area, which includes much of New Jersey. But with canceled trains and suspended service, New Jersey Transit is in a state of paralysis and breakdown that has made the summer of 2018 unendurable for many New Jersey commuters.

Train cancellations have surged this season. During the period from June 1 to July 13, 330 trains did not run, said Nancy Snyder, a spokesperson for New Jersey Transit, in an interview with the *New York Times*. The number of annulments, as the agency calls trains that did not run, has nearly doubled in comparison with the same period last year, when 174 trains were annulled. Moreover, another 64 trains did not finish their routes during this period. Even before these problems occurred, New Jersey Transit had already reduced its schedule so that it could install new equipment on its trains.

Mechanical failures have contributed to the spate of problems. But the main reason for the annulments is that there are not enough crews to operate the trains, according to Snyder. Management has reassigned some crews to install and test Positive Train Control (PTC), an automatic braking system intended to prevent collisions and high-speed derailments. After a passenger train crashed into a freight train in Los Angeles in 2008, Congress required PTC to be installed on all major rail lines.

Installation of PTC is more than halfway finished, Snyder said. But train riders have reason to be skeptical that rail performance will improve anytime soon. Congress originally required the system to be installed by the end of 2015 but relaxed its deadline in response to concerns about cost and technological questions. The new mandate is for all hardware and software to be installed, and for 50 percent of track miles to be operable, by the end of this year. But even this postponed deadline may not be enforced. New Jersey Transit expects regulators to give it a two-year extension, said Ms. Snyder. Crew shortages, and thus annulled trains, are likely to continue during this time.

Another reason for the shortage of crews is that many experienced engineers have left New Jersey Transit for railways such as Metro North and Amtrak. These organizations pay

employees about \$10 more per hour than New Jersey Transit does.

This exodus of engineers is a symptom of the agency’s remarkable underfunding and of criminal cuts to its budget. In 2009, the year before former Republican Governor Chris Christie took office, the agency received \$348 million in state aid. Year after year, Christie cut this aid, until in 2016 it reached a low of \$33 million—only 9 percent of the former amount. To survive these attacks, New Jersey Transit began using funds allocated for capital investment to pay for everyday operations. Improvements to locomotives, tracks and other equipment all but ceased.

This austerity had predictable consequences. When Super Bowl XLVIII was held in East Rutherford in 2014, New Jersey Transit did not provide enough trains and buses to bring football fans to and from the stadium.

In 2016, when state aid was at its lowest point, a speeding train hit the platform at the Hoboken station and broke beams that had supported the station’s ceiling. The roof began to collapse, a woman on the platform was killed by falling debris, and 108 people were hurt. The engineer’s injuries were critical. The National Transportation Safety Board later concluded that the lack of a speed-control system such as Positive Train Control was a contributing factor in the crash.

A decision made before Superstorm Sandy arrived in November 2012 in the state compounded the agency’s problems and showed officials’ reckless disregard. A third of New Jersey Transit’s locomotives and a quarter of its passenger cars were parked in two rail yards that were predicted to flood. When Sandy arrived, the resulting flood caused \$140 million worth of damage.

To compensate for the draconian cuts in state aid, the agency has increased its fares by 36 percent. At a hearing held by state lawmakers in 2017, Janna Chernetz, senior New Jersey policy analyst for the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, stated that more than 50 percent of New Jersey Transit’s operating budget comes from fares and that this proportion was much higher than that in other states. Thus, commuters are contributing the lion’s share of funding to the rail system, while the wealthy developers and large employers give little or no support to the transportation system.

Current Democratic Governor Phil Murphy has called New Jersey Transit a “national disgrace” and promised that service would improve. Through an executive order, he mandated an audit of its management, finances, hiring process, and customer service.

In July, Murphy signed the state’s 2019 budget, which includes \$242 million for New Jersey Transit. But this amount is barely 70

percent of the funding that the agency received in 2009 before Christie began his savage cuts. Furthermore, \$148 million of this funding is intended to close budget gaps. About \$19 million will be used to hire 114 new employees, and only \$21 million (about 9 percent of the total) will pay for bus and rail facility maintenance and software improvements. Murphy has thus indicated that rail employees and transportation safety are, in fact, his lowest priorities.

Kevin Corbett became New Jersey Transit's executive director in January. Introducing Corbett at a public ceremony, the governor said, "Starting today, we will begin to measure success by actually getting better, not because New Jersey Transit didn't actually get any worse."

But service has not improved. During the week of July 29, train #807 from Hoboken on the Morris & Essex line was annulled for three days in a row. The train had been scheduled to depart during the evening rush. Trains frequently have been cancelled during the morning rush hour as well. For three days in a row in late July, local train #3828 was annulled during the morning commute. To compensate for this annulment, express train #3926, which departs nine minutes later, was converted to a local train. Consequently, riders in Princeton Junction who needed to arrive at work in Manhattan by 9 a.m. were as much as an hour late. And on Friday, August 3, 18 trains were annulled during the morning rush hour.

Citing alleged unscheduled absences, Murphy is blaming New Jersey Transit employees for the current failures. "Like everything else, there's a small population who are spoiling it for the broader population," he said at a public hearing. "As to these instances, our administration is making it known that we need and expect everyone to report to their jobs as scheduled." In other words, conductors and engineers are to blame for not making superhuman efforts to compensate for understaffing.

But in fact, some of them are trying to do just that. Even Corbett was forced to admit, after Murphy's remarks, that "the great majority of engineers are responsible. They've been working, a lot of them doing voluntary overtime they don't necessarily need." Engineers also have been working on their days off. Their dedication stands in stark contrast to the state's belated and inadequate increase in funding for New Jersey Transit.

The agency's problems will not subside with the end of the summer. Train service will be further reduced on September 4. New Jersey Transit announced that it will take the Atlantic City Line out of service for four months and stop the Raritan Valley Line's direct service to and from New York until at least 2019. The shutdowns are intended to enable the installation of Positive Train Control.

Murphy's budget will allow for the hiring of more engineers, but training them takes as long as two years. And the agency likely needs more employees than its new budget will allow it to hire. Combined with the transportation crisis on the other side of the Hudson River, the unpredictability and irrationality of the New Jersey mass transit system is one of the many and increasingly intense social pressures driving the working class in the New York metropolitan area into a political confrontation with the two capitalist parties.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to New Jersey Transit

commuters in Manhattan's Penn Station.

Henry told us: "We are experiencing delays all the time and it is really bad. You see all these people waiting to get on a train which is late. It is supposed to leave at 4:11 p.m. and it is now scheduled to leave at 4:40 p.m. This is very common on the weekends. It is even worse if there is a major sports event like a Mets or Yankee baseball game or a football game. All of these delays can give somebody an anxiety attack.

"I also have had to wait a long time for a bus which has made me late for work in Bloomfield. A number of times, I have had to wait at a bus stop for an hour and a half and as a result, I had to walk to the train station. In the last month and half, I have been late to work three times. I have been working since I was 16 years old and have never been late to work until recently due to the transit system in New Jersey. The whole system is bankrupt."

Sehar Khan, a nuclear medicine technologist, said, "For me New Jersey Transit is super-crowded. I usually come to Penn Station or Newark early to get a seat on the train. Sometimes when I am not early, I don't get a seat and I have to stand for the whole trip. On New Jersey Transit, there is no place for people to put their luggage. So they have to put it on the chair next to them and that takes up the seats. Sometimes the luggage ends up in the aisles, but mostly it takes up the seats.

"Waiting here with the crowds like, as you can see, is a mess. When some of the train tracks are announced here in Penn Station, there is claustrophobic rushing and crowding to get on the train and get a seat."

James Wynn works for the New York water ferry system. He told us that he had just moved from Harlem to Elizabeth, New Jersey. "If I miss my New Jersey Transit train," he said, "I will have to wait for another 45 minutes. That is where all the crowds come from. Last week, the 4:14 New Jersey Transit train was delayed. They didn't say why, but it didn't arrive until 5 p.m. By then, there was supposed to be another train arriving at 5:07. They never tell you why or even when a train is late. They just tell you to keep watching the TV screen and listen to the automated voice announcements. You have a train pull in or is leaving, but you don't have the warning until the final warning that it is two minutes before the train takes off.

"See the TV screen now? The Dover train on Track 7 has not come in, and it is past the scheduled arrival time on the board. But there is no information on the board when or whether it is going to arrive at Penn Station."



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