

Audit examines the decline of New York's Long Island Rail Road

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16 August 2018

An audit issued on August 7 by the New York State Comptroller's office reviews the Long Island Rail Road's (LIRR's) declining quality of service, throwing the spotlight on the inability of LIRR management to respond appropriately to train delays.

The LIRR is one of the component parts of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), a state agency that operates North America's largest public transportation system, serving New York City and seven surrounding counties in New York and parts of Connecticut. The LIRR, which carries more than 300,000 passengers on an average weekday, is not only the largest commuter railroad in America but is also the oldest still operating under its original name.

The audit reviews previous studies that established that the LIRR had, in 2017, its worst on-time performance since 1999. It is estimated that 9.2 million commuters experienced late train service or saw trains canceled outright last year, either before leaving the terminal or en route before reaching their destinations.

The audit notes that service sharply deteriorated between December 2017 and January 2018. In January, trains only arrived on time 83.9 percent of the time, a significant drop from January 2017's 92.4 percent. In January 2018 alone, 3,333 trains were late, canceled or partially canceled.

The audit found that, in addition to these delays and cancellations, the LIRR management, despite promises and pledges to the passengers, did not respond appropriately to assist the riders, and only added to commuter misery when these events occurred.

For example, from December 1, 2017, to January 24, 2018, 5,067 trains were cancelled or delayed for 15 minutes or more. The auditors sampled 11 of these incidents and found that the LIRR did not even have a contingency plan for 5 of the 11. While the other 6 had plans, none of these plans' required steps were activated.

In these 11 incidents, status announcements to passengers were either not made or were made late. Nor could the LIRR document the use of replacement buses to expedite the movement of the riders on the delayed or cancelled trains. Only once in the aftermath of the 11 incidents sampled did the railroad hold a "lessons learned" meeting.

The auditors made the predictable recommendations that plans should be developed and followed to assist riders when delays occur—advice to the MTA and LIRR that is hardly new. In this regard, however, even the rather staid language of the audit is revealing when it says: "The MTA-LIRR response states it agrees with the audit recommendations and that it has already implemented many of them. However, as much of the response does not directly address the recommendations, it is unclear if this is accurate."

In addition to the report, it is a stark reality that the LIRR has been undergoing what is being called another "summer of hell," a phrase that was first employed by New York Governor Andrew Cuomo to denote the train delays experienced last summer due to emergency track work at Pennsylvania Station, the major hub in Manhattan for the LIRR.

Since July, there have been numerous signal and switch problems in the LIRR system along with a disabled Amtrak train, which shares tracks with the LIRR, causing delays. LIRR trains have struck and killed three people who were walking the tracks on different occasions, creating significant delays.

A LIRR derailment on July 21—about which the railroad did not inform the public for 24 hours—caused two days of delays. There was another derailment on July 28 in the Jamaica, Queens, trainyard, which reduced the number of cars available, and a third derailment on August 1 on a train carrying more than 400 passengers, creating havoc throughout the day. An August 7 lightning strike on a

substation caused a fire that disrupted service, and another lighting strike August 8 caused a power failure and further delays.

Several riders at Pennsylvania Station taking the LIRR recently spoke to the WSWS about their experience with increasingly frequent delays.

Ralph Ortiz, who works for a real estate company and rides the LIRR regularly, raised many of the issues addressed in the audit.

“The Long Island Rail Road is just getting worse and worse. One significant reason for this has to do with what they don’t do after a delay or breakdown. Previously, if they had a major delay, they would have another train or buses to take you from the delay point to where you needed to go or to where you could make connections. Now they don’t. They just leave you.

“About a month ago, I had to pay \$65 for a taxi ride when the LIRR train broke down, and there were about 10 other people in the van-style taxi with me who came from the same train.

“I am late two or three times a week because of the LIRR train delays. I get paid by the hour, and when I am late it gets very expensive for me.

“Every morning, I turn on Channel 61, and they are listing or announcing one LIRR train delay after another. The system needs to be changed from top to bottom.

“Last summer was the ‘Summer of Hell’ on the LIRR and the MTA. The MTA was supposed to hire people to fix this. Two Saturdays ago, there was an LIRR derailment here at Penn station, and they didn’t say a word about it. Monday’s schedule was completely messed up because of the derailment. It is the leadership that sucks.”

Angelos Lamb, a homemaker who regularly rides the LIRR, complained that “They are making structural repairs, but not to the stations and the infrastructure which are in greater need. One such station is in Hollis, Queens, which needs a whole new overhaul.

“At Hicksville, if you look up underneath the platform from the street, there are big cracks in the pillars holding up the platform. The pillars are crumbling and have pieces missing. It needs to be recast with concrete. Instead, they are working on the platform that doesn’t need that much work. They are picking only the easiest, cheapest, and the most visible repairs to do.

“What we have here are constant derailments. It is not just tight curves, but inclines and drops around these curves, and the change of rail height which are dangerous. I was never in a derailment on the LIRR, but I was on one

on Amtrak, and a derailment is dangerous and super-scary.”

Jorge, another regular rider, explained, “I have experienced delays many times on the weekends. The more serious events take place when it rains. It is even worse when it snows. Then the service is super-bad. It is not right that before you even know that there will be a delay, the conductor already has punched your ticket which means that you have paid for a ride that will arrive late.”

It is acknowledged by the MTA that it will take tens of billions of dollars to repair its aging system. Yet the MTA has deep financial obligations to big capitalist investors, with a nearly \$40 billion long-term bond debt. The S&P lowered its rating of the transit agency last Thursday from A+ to A. The rating agency has stated that the MTA’s credit outlook is “negative,” which means that the transit authority will have to raise the amount of interest it pays to the bondholders to compensate for their extra risk they are taking by investing in a decaying system.

This will only deepen the MTA’s financial crisis, which the MTA will seek to pass on to commuters and transit workers. Riders have been hit with fare hikes every two years, and even more are projected in the future. Concessions contracts against MTA employees are now being negotiated by the unions.

Meanwhile the funds obtained by cheating the working class barely keep the system afloat, as service continues to deteriorate and the chances of a catastrophic accident increase daily. There is no solution to the basic transportation needs of millions under capitalism, a social and economic system dedicated to enriching the wealthy with tax cuts and dedicating huge resources for the military to defend their interests in imperialists wars.



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