

# New Jersey train operator killed, 23 passengers injured in rail accident

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A New Jersey River Line Light Rail train traveling south hit a large section of a tree Monday morning, killing the train operator and injuring about two dozen passengers. The accident took place in the southern part of the state in a very wooded area near the Delaware River.

The operator who was killed was Jessica Haley, 41, a single mother of three boys who had worked for 20 years. She was employed by Alstom, a contractor that runs the train line in that area for New Jersey Transit.

The window of the front car was smashed, and the tree ended up partly under the train. Out of the 42 riders on board at that time, 23 suffered non-life-threatening injuries. One passenger on the train, Norris Young, who spoke to an NBC affiliate, reported that some of the riders had open wounds and that he was “still shaken up. Somebody lost their life.”

NJ Transit President and CEO Kevin Corbett said that “It was a few minutes past 6 in the morning and was still dark, coming around a bend in that area, a tree had fallen down right across the rail as she came around the turn and smashed into the tree.”

The National Safety Transportation Board will be investigating the incident. One question is how part of the tree ended up on the tracks and why safety procedures were not in place to prevent the crash.

Jessica Haley’s train was the first southbound scheduled for that day. Four days before the accident and just a few miles away on the same line, a train hit a truck at a crossing injuring the train operator and four passengers.

Rebecca Haley, Jessica’s sister and a train operator herself, said that this has been a problem for years and that “other trains had hit downed trees in recent years.” A lawyer for the family, Kila Baldwin, explained that train crews have complained for years about the danger

of trees falling onto the tracks. They proposed that a track car goes down the line every morning before the first passenger train does.

The family attorney said that “It is the duty of all companies who operate trains to ensure the tracks are clear for the safety of everyone on those trains, including the operators of the trains, like Ms. Haley. This never should have happened, and we will be investigating the case carefully to hold responsible parties accountable.”

Baldwin further stated, “At one point, certain dangerous trees were marked with X’s, but nothing was done to remove those or make sure they were cleared so they didn’t fall on the tracks. There had been a landslide in that same area recently, and a small retaining wall was put up in one section to prevent debris from falling on the tracks, but many sections of the track, including the one where Jessica was killed, had no protection.”

The attorney stated that they intend to file a tort claims act against New Jersey Transit, as well as several other entities, for “failure of the responsible parties to inspect these tracks and keep them clear.” In addition to suing NJ Transit, the lawsuit includes Alstom and Burlington County.

This accident is a consequence of the fact that transit infrastructure and operations have been consistently starved for funds for decades by both parties at the state and federal levels. After a major commuter rail crash in Hoboken in 2016 that killed one and injured over 100, investigations revealed the NJ Transit had been involved in more than 150 accidents and paid more than \$500,000 to settle safety violations over the previous five years.

Rail accidents are a daily fact of life in the United States, with an average of three derailments alone per

day. Through July, 43 people were killed and 149 injured in rail accidents across the country, according to figures from the Federal Railroad Administration.

Overall, at least 5,000 workers have been killed in workplace accidents in six of seven years between 2016 and 2022, the last figure for which full government numbers are available. Recent deaths include West Virginia coal miner Colton Walls, who passed away earlier this month, becoming the 10th coal miner to die this year, already surpassing 2023's total.

Last week, one person died and 23 had to be rescued after a malfunction in an elevator used at the Mollie Kathleen Gold Mine in Colorado, a private tourist attraction.

The New Jersey agency's perpetual underfunding has also had a significant impact on service. During the summer months, commuters suffered five major delays on NJ Transit trains in and out of New York's Pennsylvania station. This marked the third straight year of widespread service disruptions.

If anything, the service levels are even worse in South Jersey, where the accident took place. The River Line, which is operated by the for-profit transnational Alstom under a \$25 million annual contract, had the lowest on-time performance of any light rail line in the state, just 74.9 percent in June of this year. This summer, a New Jersey state senator requested hearings on the River Line, citing the persistence of canceled or delayed trains. Last year, rush hour service on the line was halved amid heating and ventilation issues due to the aging train stocks.

The agency has sought to offload the funding crisis on workers and riders. As of July 1, train commuters and bus riders had to pay a 15 percent fare hike plus an annual 3 percent increase starting in July 2025. In addition, locomotive engineers, members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, an affiliate of the Teamsters union, have been working without a new contract since January 1, 2020. They are demanding a bigger wage hike than the 2 to 3 percent that the 14 other NJ Transit unions accepted—a cut in real wages when compared to the rate of inflation.

The death of train operator Jessica Haley is not simply an accident. It is the outcome of a system where profit reigns supreme over workers' lives. Money is used to stuff the pockets of billionaires and multi-millionaires and fund imperialist wars while neglecting

the basic maintenance and safety measures that the working class depends on.



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