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The Amtrak disaster and America's crumbling infrastructure

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Tuesday's derailment of an Amtrak train on America's busiest rail route has exposed before the whole world the crumbling state of infrastructure in the United States.

Eight people were killed, over two hundred injured and rail traffic snarled for a week for the simple reason that the publicly funded Amtrak commuter railway had not implemented a basic automated train control system.

While the precise circumstances that led up to the catastrophe are still being investigated, it is clear that the train accelerated to twice the speed limit around a sharp turn on an dangerous and antiquated portion of the track. Officials from the National Transportation Safety Board are considering the possibility that before this happened, the cabin may have been struck by a rock or a bullet, based on a radio discussion overheard by the assistant conductor. The windshield of a nearby regional train had also been hit by a projectile shortly before the Amtrak train derailed.

Whatever caused the train to speed up sharply before it derailed, it could have been easily prevented by a safety system known as "positive train control." As a result of chronic underfunding, the system had not been installed on that section of the rail line, leaving no backup in the event of human or mechanical error.

Engineer Brandon Bostian, who was driving the train at the time that of the accident, had previously been a vocal critic of the woefully inadequate safety systems on US rail lines, declaring on an online forum that “they have had nearly a hundred years of opportunity to implement SOME sort of system to mitigate human error.”

The media and political establishment have been quick to point the finger at Bostian, with Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter, a Democrat, declaring that his conduct was “clearly...reckless.” These efforts to blame the engineer are a transparent attempt to divert attention from those who are actually responsible for the tragedy.

America, a country with more billionaires than all of Europe combined, has a public rail system that is dilapidated and obsolete. The US rail system could be called “third world,” but in fact many developing countries have significantly more advanced infrastructure.

Turkey, a country with one-twelfth the area of the United States, has more miles of high-speed rail. China has nearly eight times more high-speed rail track, and in much better condition, with some trains traveling nearly 100 miles per hour faster than those operating on America’s only high-speed rail line.

The chronic underfunding is not for lack of demand for rail transit. Amtrak’s ridership has increased every year for over a decade and is up by more than 50 percent since 2000.

But funding for the system has dwindled year after year. According to Amtrak, by 2019 funding for the Northeast Corridor, where the crash took place, is slated to cover only one fourth of what is needed to keep the system in good repair.

Rail is only one component of America’s glaring infrastructure crisis. In New York City, only 20 percent of roads are in good condition, while 27 percent of bridges are “functionally obsolete,” according to one survey.

The American Society of Civil Engineers has given infrastructure in the United States a D (poor) rating, with no element of infrastructure receiving more than a B- rating. The country’s levees, such as the ones that failed during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, received a D-, while roads received a D, as did schools, transit, aviation and dams. The country needs to invest an additional \$3.6 trillion to raise its infrastructure to the level of a “B” rating by 2020, according to the group.

The media and political establishment defends the systematic defunding of infrastructure on the grounds that there is no money for levees, bridges and modern rail lines. This claim is made, with a straight face, in a country that spends more money on the military than the next ten nations combined, and that has three times more billionaires than any other.

The funding priorities of the United States government recall the maxim of Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels, who infamously declared, “we can do without butter, but...not without arms.”

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are expected to have a total cost of up to \$6 trillion, according to a 2013 Harvard study, or nearly twice the cost of repairing America’s infrastructure. The

lifetime cost of just one US weapons system, the F-35 joint strike fighter, is estimated to be \$1.5 trillion.

In addition to the vast resources lavished on the military, countless billions of social wealth are diverted every year into the pockets of the financial oligarchy. The Federal Reserve's "quantitative easing" program, which has created over three trillion dollars in paper wealth for the financial elite, could well have covered the entire infrastructure shortfall documented by the American Society of Civil Engineers.

Just two days after the Amtrak crash, a spike in Facebook stock made billionaire CEO Mark Zuckerberg \$1.2 billion wealthier in a single day. This is nearly equivalent to the annual federal funding for Amtrak.

The combined wealth of the 400 richest people in the United States comes out to \$2.29 trillion, or a staggering 1,635 times the annual federal funding for Amtrak.

The entire annual transportation budget of the federal government, some \$27.4 billion, is roughly the equivalent to the increase in the wealth of Bill Gates over the past three years alone.

The primary concern of the American state is neither the satisfaction of social needs, nor the basic upkeep of the infrastructure needed for economic production itself. Rather, the state concerns itself with the promotion of endless wars abroad, the funneling of trillions of dollars into the police/intelligence apparatus and, at the core of it all, the enrichment of a parasitic and criminal oligarchy that has ruined American society to quench its obscene lust for personal wealth.

The United States, the center of imperialism and the global financial system, expresses in the highest form the rot, decay and historically bankrupt nature of the capitalist system. This obsolete and irrational system must be done away with and replaced by socialism. The expropriation of the wealth of the financial aristocracy and the rational reorganization of society to meet the social needs of the population is a matter of the greatest urgency.