

Editorial

The great train wreck

Likening the ongoing collapse of the world economy to a train wreck in the making, is an appropriate metaphor. Tragically, it has turned into far more than a metaphor, as witnessed by two fatal rail accidents on the East Coast within the span of barely more than a week. It is the parasitical growth of the speculative economy which is derailing the physical economy; the collapse of infrastructure is one of the consequences.

While there may turn out to be an important element of operator error in both accidents, that is by no means the whole story. Rail safety systems should, after all, be virtually fail-safe; yet, in the past months, there have been four major train crashes in the United States.

On Feb. 1, a freight train with a cargo of dangerous chemicals derailed in a mountain pass near Devore, California and erupted into flames, killing two crew members and closing the main highway between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, Nevada. On Feb. 9, two New Jersey Transit commuter trains collided, killing two crew members and one passenger. On Feb. 15, a freight train slammed into a railroad office building in a freight yard in east St. Paul, Minnesota, injuring nine people.

On Feb. 16, the crash of a Maryland commuter (MARC) train and an Amtrak train in Silver Spring, Maryland, in which 11 people died, and many more were injured, exemplifies the process. All the casualties, including three crew members and eight passengers, were on the MARC train. Visibility was low due to snow conditions, and the engineer of the commuter train, which was apparently travelling at 63 miles per hour, went through a yellow warning signal without reducing speed.

Lacking was an "automatic train stop system," which automatically brings a train to a halt if it fails to heed a restrictive signal. These are in common use on tracks in the rail system on the East Coast of the United States, but were considered to be an unnecessary expense by the corporate management of the CSX rail system, from which MARC leases its track.

The Amtrak train's lead locomotive, which was

an older General Motors model, had tanks containing thousands of gallons of diesel fuel mounted beneath it in an exposed fashion. When the crash occurred, the exposed fuel tanks ruptured, and doused and incinerated the lead car of the MARC train. It was this which caused the death of the eight passengers on the MARC train, who died either from smoke inhalation or were burned alive.

By contrast, the second Amtrak locomotive, which was a newer General Electric model, had better-designed fuel tanks, which survived the impact without leakage. Had this modern locomotive been in use on the first Amtrak locomotive, it is likely the MARC passengers would be alive today.

The MARC train, after it apparently ran the yellow signal, then came to a red, stop signal. This signal could only be seen at close range because of a bend in the roadway. By the time the red signal became visible, there was only 1,800 feet in which to stop the train. There had originally been an additional signal placed at the bend in the road, but it was torn down, and CSX never replaced it.

In typical fashion, the media have been blaming the crew members of the MARC train, all of whom died, and, conveniently for some, can't defend themselves. While all the evidence is not yet in, what is known is that no alcohol was found in their bodies, each of them had more than 25 years of experience, and none of them had a blemish on their safety records.

The moral of the story, is that failure to maintain and modernize the nation's infrastructure takes its toll not only on the physical economy, by hindering the necessary flow of goods, but it also kills people. In circumstances in which monetary considerations (i.e., reaping short-term profits) are the priority, we can expect more and more train wrecks, as the physical economy collapses.

U.S. Department of Transportation investigators say they have found nothing linking the four crashes. The link is obvious: the collapse of U.S. infrastructure.