

What happened to U.S. passenger trains?

written by Stephen Millies
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Amtrak workers in New York protested threatened layoffs in 2018.

People around the world celebrate May Day as the international workers' holiday. This past May 1st was also the 50th anniversary of Amtrak, the U.S. government's passenger train system.

Until the coronavirus pandemic, Amtrak's 20,000 employees carried almost [32 million passengers annually](#). The railroad's Northeast Corridor between Boston and Washington, D.C., and a few other lines offer frequent service.

But for most people in the United States passenger trains are just a memory. There's no Amtrak service to Columbus, Ohio, or Nashville, Tenn. Both these state capitals have metropolitan area populations of around 2 million.

Amtrak also doesn't serve Las Vegas, Nev., and Louisville, Ky. Neither South Dakota or Wyoming have any passenger trains. There's no service between Chicago, Atlanta and Florida.

That's a shame and a special burden for elderly and disabled people. Although airline and other transportation workers try to be as helpful as possible, passenger trains have more room than either planes or buses. They're wheelchair accessible.

Of all the big capitalist countries, only Canada has a similar lack of passenger trains. The European and Japanese rail systems are renowned for frequent and fast trains. India's railroads carry 12 million passengers daily.

Then there's the socialist People's Republic of China, which has more miles of high-speed train lines than the rest of the world combined.

Bailing out railroad companies

President Richard Nixon signed the bill that established the National Passenger

Railroad Corporation on May 1, 1971. Nixon's father was a motorman on the old Pacific Electric transit system in Southern California. But the Watergate war criminal who was murdering Black Panther Party leaders like Fred Hampton wasn't known to be a train buff.

Amtrak was set up to bail out the Penn Central railroad system. Its 20,000 miles of track dominated rail service in the Northeastern and Midwestern states. Auto, steel and other industries depended on it.

The Pennsylvania and New York Central railroads combined to form Penn Central on Feb. 1, 1968. It was the biggest corporate merger up to that time. Penn Central was the sixth biggest U.S. corporation and largest transportation company.

And when Penn Central declared insolvency on June 21, 1970, it was the [largest bankruptcy in history](#) until the crooked Enron utility empire went under in 2001. Penn Central's bankruptcy [threatened to tank Goldman Sachs](#) and many other banks.

Amtrak was started to save Penn Central from losing millions by operating 35 percent of the country's passenger trains. This included big commuter train operations serving Boston, New York City and Philadelphia.

The only way Congress could be persuaded to set up Amtrak was if there were some trains to serve the rest of the country, too. Passenger train service had already shrunk enormously since the mid-1950s.

Revenues from carrying the mail subsidized many trains. President Lyndon Johnson's action in sending first class mail via the airlines was fatal. The Santa Fe — now part of the BNSF railway — immediately filed to abandon its trains linking California and Texas with Chicago.

Cut backs are a train wreck

Starting Amtrak resulted in cutting half of the remaining passenger trains. Thousands of railroad workers lost their jobs.

Just in Wisconsin, service was dropped to Appleton, Green Bay, Kenosha, Manitowoc, Racine and Sheboygan. More cuts were made in 1979 when [six Amtrak routes](#) serving 5,000 miles were eliminated.

Amtrak has only one train between New York City and Chicago. Back in 1953, the New York Central ran seven daily trains between the two cities while the Pennsylvania had six. More trains to the Windy City left from the Erie, Jersey Central and Lackawanna terminals across the Hudson River.

It wasn't just jet planes and the interstate highway system that killed passenger trains. The ruling class didn't need them anymore.

Workers couldn't afford the fare on famous all-Pullman sleeping car trains like the New York Central's "20th Century Limited" or the Pennsylvania's "Broadway Limited." It was the prosperous few who rode these palaces on wheels with delicious meals prepared in the dining cars by Black chefs.

Capitalists dumped these trains. What did they need Pullmans for when they could jet around the world and stay in hotel suites? The super-rich also went from owning private railroad cars to having their own jets.

Ending passenger service went hand-in-hand with cutting railroad employment from 1.4 million workers in 1947 to around 200,000 today. At least 50,000 miles of track have been abandoned.

For decades the Association of American Railroads attacked safety rules, claiming workers were being coddled. The AAR bosses called these absolutely necessary regulations "feather bedding."

Crew sizes were cut in both the U.S. and Canada. An inevitable result was 47 people killed in the 2013 train wreck in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec. A lone engineer was the only crew member on a long train of oil tank cars.

All transportation workers have been under attack. Deregulation and bankruptcy laws have been used to attack airline workers and the Teamsters union.

President Joe Biden has now proposed to invest billions in new passenger trains. That's a popular proposal.

Even some of the wealthy see the need to have more passenger service. They view it as part of renewing the capitalist infrastructure.

It's also an attempt to catch up with socialist China. We need what China has: train service for all.

The writer is a retired Amtrak worker.

