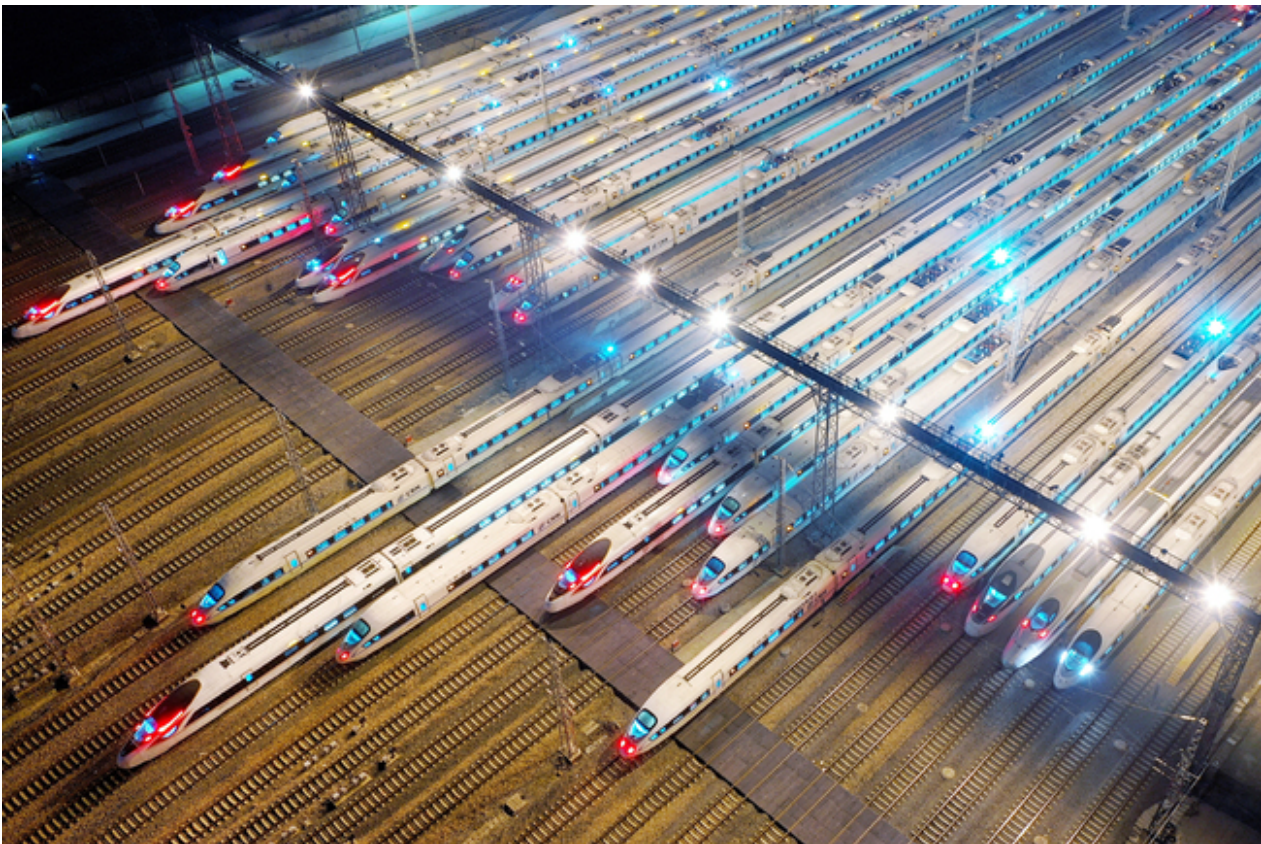


A retired railroader looks at China's fantastic railroad system

written by Stephen Millies
October 1, 2024



Aerial view of China Railway high-speed bullet trains in Nanjing, Jiangsu

Province, January 21, 2019. Photo: Xinhua

A telling comparison between capitalist decay in the United States and surging economic growth in the socialist People's Republic of China is in their railroad systems.

Between 1950 and 2000, more than [79,000 miles of railroad lines](#) were abandoned in the United States. Passenger service, now run by Amtrak, has withered.

Meanwhile, China has greatly increased its railroad network and now has 100,000 miles of track. China has built twice as many miles of [high-speed rail](#) than the rest of the world combined.

Last year, Chinese railways carried [3.68 billion passengers](#). That's 10 million passengers daily, a hundred times Amtrak's ridership.

China's railroads are on schedule to move [4 billion metric tons of freight](#) in 2024. That's about [three times](#) the U.S. total.

Socialist China will invest almost [\\$108 billion](#) in its railroads this year. That's four-and-half times the [\\$23 billion](#) railroad monopolies in the capitalist United States spend on average.

How about urban transport? China has 55 cities with subway systems. Just in Beijing, [three new metro lines](#) will open this year.

In contrast, New York City has been trying to complete the construction of the Second Avenue subway for a century. Wall Street's hometown may be the only metropolis with less rapid transit than it had in the 1930s. That's because elevated lines were torn down without replacing them with subways.

The biggest victims of capitalist railroad shrinkage in the U.S. are railroad workers.

There were two million workers on the railroads in 1920.

The Great Depression helped reduce railroad employment to 1.5 million workers [in 1947](#). Since then, railroad jobs have fallen [by 90%](#), with just 151,200 railroaders working in August 2024.

That's a smaller number of railroad workers than [in 1870](#), one year after the first transcontinental railroad in the United States was completed. These massive job cuts devastated railroad towns coast to coast.

Railroads and racism

Before any railroads were built in China, 15,000 Chinese immigrants were indispensable to building the transcontinental railroad across the Sierra Nevada mountains in California and Nevada. At least a thousand were killed.

Chinese workers, who were 90% of the [Central Pacific's workforce](#), were paid as low as \$26 a month, considerably less than their white counterparts. When they went on strike in 1867 over these dangerous conditions and low pay, their demands were ignored by the wealthy railroad moguls.

These tycoons included Leland Stanford, who founded Stanford University, and Charles Crocker, whose Crocker National Bank was merged into Wells Fargo in 1986.

When you hear reactionaries from Stanford University and its Hoover Institution attack the People's Republic of China, remember that Stanford's endowment includes the blood of Chinese immigrants.

Chinese workers were not given any thanks for their vital contribution. At the May 10, 1969, [centennial of the Golden Spike ceremony](#), marking the transcontinental railroad's completion — now all part of the Union Pacific — Transportation Secretary

John Volpe refused even to mention the Chinese railroad workers.

Two years after the Golden Spike, working people in Paris “stormed heaven,” in Karl Marx’s words, and formed the Paris Commune, the first working-class government. The same year, in Los Angeles, then a village with a population of 6,000, 18 Chinese people were lynched in an 1871 pogrom.

Ten percent of the local Chinese population were murdered. Sixty years later, the city’s Chinese community was forced to move so Union Station could be built.

In the capitalist United States, railroads and racism went hand-in-hand. Before the Civil War, 9,000 miles of railroads were built by enslaved Africans.

Thousands more miles of tracks were laid after the Civil War by Black prisoners. Among them was the “steel-driving man” John Henry, who was worked to death building the Chesapeake and Ohio, now part of the CSX system. The capitalist running the C&O was Collis P. Huntington, one of the Central Pacific’s founders.

Another big railroad capitalist was the former slave owner Johns Hopkins, whose fortune came from the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (B&O), now also part of CSX. His loot established Johns Hopkins University and its medical school in Baltimore.

General George Custer had it coming. He died for the Northern Pacific — now part of billionaire Warren Buffet’s BNSF — that was invading Lakota Sioux land.

Capitalism vs. socialism

About [41 high-speed trains](#) travel daily between the Chinese capital of Beijing and Shanghai. They take around four-and-a-half hours to make the 819-mile trip.

Amtrak has one train, the Capitol Limited, between Washington D.C. and Chicago. It takes 17.5 hours to cover the 764-mile distance.

None of this is the fault of Amtrak workers. It's the result of decades of a capitalist class allowing much of the railroad system to decay.

On Oct. 1, 1949, Mao Zedong declared that "China has stood up." The People's Republic of China was born. At the time there were maybe [12,000 miles](#) of operable railroad track in the country.

Seventy-five years later, China's railroad network has increased eight times in length and many more times in capacity. Almost all of it is owned and operated by the socialist government. There are 2.2 million railroad workers in China.

U.S. railroads were so dangerous that one in nine rail workers was injured in 1909. One in 205 were killed.

The response of the old Interstate Commerce Commission - abolished in 1996 in the name of deregulation - was to stop collecting these embarrassing statistics. ("The Economic History of the United States" by Ernest Bogart)

Two years ago, railroad tycoons like Warren Buffett refused to agree to sick days for railroaders whose work schedules could include any time of day or night, any day of the week.

We need what the People's Republic of China has: a socialist railroad system. The people need to take over the railroads.

The writer is a retired Amtrak worker and a member of the American Train Dispatchers Association and Transportation Communications International Union.

