

# Put Train Operators Onto Live Tracks

By GINGER ADAMS OTIS

Increased debris on city subway tracks isn't just a delay-causing inconvenience for straphangers, according to members of Transit Workers' Union Local 100. They claim it's also a serious hazard for the Train Operators forced to descend onto live tracks to clear blockages out of the way.

Train Operator shop stewards from Local 100 brought a grievance to New York City Transit in March about the procedure, stating that poor lighting and a lack of proper flagging could contribute to a third-rail accident or even contact with another train on an adjacent track. Uppermost in their minds, the stewards said, is worry about Communications-Based Train Control (CBTC) trains, the remote-controlled trains that NYC Transit is implementing along the L line in Canarsie that will be staffed by only one person—the Train Operator.

### Call for Help?

"If that person gets hurt, who's there to call for help for the worker? At least now the Operator knows that a Conductor is present to watch his back," said Fautino Medina, a Train Operator and Local 100 shop steward.

Mr. Medina estimates that at least six trains a day go into "brakes in emergency" mode, with a subsequent delay of 20 to 30 minutes. "The train goes over something on the tracks—garbage, a plastic bag, a piece of wood or



TWU photo by Dennis Boyd

### FAUTINO MEDINA: Who's going to help?

equipment left by a contractor—and trips the emergency brake underneath," he elaborated. "The train stops and the Train Operator's job is to climb down and look underneath every single car to make sure there's not a body there, and then reach underneath and remove whatever tripped the brake."

To make sure the collision between train and debris didn't cause structural damage, an Emergency Response Team (ERT) is sent to inspect the rails, looking for anything that could cause a future derailment. Pat Lynch, a veteran Track Inspector, said an ERT is always dispatched, even if the Train Operator cleared the blockage and moved on.

Every time an ERT moves

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into an area for inspection, train traffic slows down, he said. The increased debris on the tracks creates more brakes-in-emergency episodes, which create more inspections, which create more delays—as well as more fires, he added, since the sparks from wheels have plenty of paper trash to settle into. Following NYC Transit protocol, track workers routinely write up any anomalies or potential hazards they spot that need attention or repair—a white ticket means non-urgent, yellow indicates some urgency and red means immediate repairs must be made.

### Get Worse Quickly

Mr. Lynch said that by his count, there are currently some 14,000 tickets pending—6,000 yellow and 8,000 white. In 2000, he said, Track Inspectors filed 1,800 yellow and white tickets. Mr. Lynch said he didn't know how many red tickets there were, but noted that yellow situations could turn red very fast.

"With all the wear and tear and constant vibrations, things go south pretty quickly once they start to deteriorate," he said. "It takes constant upkeep to keep things in a state of good repair. You need intense maintenance."

Mr. Lynch alleged that NYC Transit reassigned about 80 workers who usually cleaned up trash along the tracks to maintenance and repair duty.



JOHN SAMUELSEN: 'Put workers in harm's way.'

# Operators Cite Risks of Increased Trips to Tracks

NYC Transit denies that claim. Management attributed the jump in debris to an increased number of riders, who produce a considerable amount of daily detritus.

The fact that the subway system is in a state of disrepair isn't news to straphangers, who have dealt with relay-room fires, floods, and regular delays to service in the past three months. For Train Operators, the jump in blockages resulted in more walks along a live track to fish around for whatever tripped the emergency brake.

## Life At Risk

Dennis Boyd, a Train Operator and Local 100 executive board member, said workers believe that they put their life at risk every time they step out of the cab. "The lights are low in many places and sometimes space is so tight that the only way you can fully check underneath the train—which can be 600 feet long—without getting too close to the third rail is to walk the live track alongside," he said. "You just pray the Conductor got through to Command Control and told them you are in the area, and that they've told everyone else."

Mr. Boyd said having a

Train Conductor aboard is important because it reassures passengers, reassures the Operator on the tracks, and keeps contact with Command Control. And sometimes, he said, Train Conductors help the Operator navigate tricky segments of the train, especially when climbing down the pantographic gates between cars is required.

## More Frequent Worry

Train Operators have gone onto tracks under these conditions for years now—it's standard practice. If NYC Transit agrees to allow for proper flagging procedures for Train Operators, it would likely increase delays in service. However, Local 100 shop stewards said they had to make it an issue because conditions are increasingly hazardous for workers. And also, Mr. Medina said, it could be highly unsafe for passengers.

"We had a situation about 10 years ago where a train engine died between Manhattan and Queens Plaza. It was hot, it was summer, and when the lights and air-con shut down, those people panicked," he said. "They kicked out the emergency windows, and suddenly we had about a

thousand people on the track." With two trained workers at the scene, said Mr. Medina, one was able to keep passengers from straying too far while the other called for help and told Command Control to switch off power to the area immediately. Otherwise, said Mr. Medina, there probably would have been a third-rail accident.

## Work in Tandem

"When something goes wrong with a train, it's always better to have two people," he reiterated. "One deals with passengers, one talks to Command. One goes on the tracks, one watches his back. When an evacuation is needed, one goes up the nearest evacuation route to make sure it works.

"You can't be climbing up 10 flights of stairs with 500 people behind you to discover that a car is parked on your exit. So the Train Operator and Conductor work in tandem. After one checks the exit, he takes people up and one stays on the train to make sure nobody is left behind."

Sometimes an emergency

occurs in the middle of the train. That happened four months ago during a 3 a.m. fire along the F train track at 34th St. station. In that instance, the Train Operator led one group to safety from the rear of the train and the Conductor took the rest of the passengers through the front exit. Every situation is different, Mr. Medina said, but it never hurts to have extra hands.

While Mr. Medina and Mr. Boyd laid out the union's argument on behalf of passengers, John Samuelsen, vice president of Maintenance of Way, expressed his ire at management on behalf of the workers. "It's outrageous that in 2005, after a couple of dozen fatalities since the 1980s, that they would even consider letting people go down on the tracks without flagging protection," he said heatedly. "It flies in the face of everything they've said they stand for in terms of worker safety. They go to hearings and committees and pontificate about how cognizant they are of worker safety, and then day in and day out they throw people in harm's way in such a blasé fashion."