

# AMALGAMATED TRANSIT UNION LOCAL 689

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Testimony of Jackie L. Jeter  
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Before

The Subcommittees on Transportation and Public Assets and Government Operations  
February 13, 2015

Mr. Chairmen, Ranking and Committee members,

My name is Jackie L. Jeter and I am the President of the ATU Local 689. Five years ago, after the tragic June 2009 Red Line accident, Local 689 testified in support of retraining plans, routine recertification and equipment upgrades. We made vocal our belief that the cultivation of a safety culture at Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) would not only benefit our members, but just as importantly, the riders. While we commend the improvements made since the 2009 accident, most of which have been in the procedures for track work and work areas, we would like to point out that we have not yet reached the point of celebration and from the recent accident that's brought us in front of you again, we have not yet mastered the task of the development of a safety culture.

Like WMATA, Local 689 bears the scars of all the accidents that have resulted in the loss of life. The last ten lives lost in accidents at WMATA since 2005 are glaring examples of the lack of a safety culture that has existed for some time. I am here today to testify to the troubling fact that we are ***still*** lacking acceptance of the need for a Safety Culture at WMATA.

When I speak of a Safety Culture I am referring to the overall attitudes, beliefs and atmosphere that is cultivated at a company. I suggest that everyone in this company, from the GM to the Custodians, is invested in making sure that safety is our number one priority. This attitude is reinforced from the top with reassurance that rules are created and implemented fairly, not just knee jerk reactions to a recent event, and is strengthened from the bottom up with how employees view their craft and their responsibilities daily. Think about it: people experience a sense of pride when they are treated with dignity on the job, when their opinions are valued, when their family responsibilities are respected, when they have a feeling of ownership and experience security. I am constantly bombarded with the complaints of lack of morale and confidence in the handling of our care, and that comes from managers and union

members. The majority of the employees of WMATA do not have comfort in the feeling of safety.

One part of establishing a safety culture is providing employees with the opportunity to express suggestions and comments when they feel they have safety concerns. In order to be effective, it matters what is done with the concerns and information. There is a developed sense of paranoia and it is difficult to get members/employees to trust that WMATA will handle the information given concerning safety, or just simple facts such as a sick child, with care. A safety culture can only be created when all employees are confident that their opinions are valued. They have to trust in the fact that their information will be handled properly, and for the good of the entire company, not against them. We believe that it takes a constant investment in workers as well as property. It takes the acceptance of ideas and trust in their ability, to build confidence in their company's efforts, their co-workers skills and the implementation of safety initiatives that protect and build excellence on their behalf!

I have stated to officials at WMATA, openly and honestly, that they cannot suspend their way to a right and just safety culture and that is predominately how safety problems are handled. WMATA thinks that a safety culture can be developed with the misuse of discipline. Instead of implementing training and re-training procedures, and preparing their employees for catastrophic events, like the Jan 12th event, they insist on harshly punishing even the smallest uniform violation. Most of our members are not sent to safety training until they make a mistake. We do not have training programs that employees can freely attend, to enhance their skill level, without permission and safety consciousness is not developed while they are performing their jobs correctly. This is not the habit of a healthy safety culture. In order to have a great safety culture, training and discipline have to go hand in hand in a pro-active way. A glaring example of this fact is that all WMATA employees travel and traverse the Metro rail system but only select employees are trained to evacuate passengers or trained to handle emergency situations such as smoke or fire in the tunnels. And if they are trained when they are hired, that investment is never made again.

One of the recommendations implemented from the 2009 accident were Safety Committee meetings, and they mattered to my members, but Local 689 has long understood that the Safety Committee meetings are no longer attended as heavily as they were in the beginning because the topics of discussion, which are also the same items presented to the Metro Board of Directors, only include bus or employee accidents, employee absenteeism, and employee Workmen's Compensation claims. The employees who attend are chosen by Management, so the masses do not attend because they feel that the items discussed are not their day to day experience. A safety culture has to be about the interest of employer, worker and rider safety, not just the employers thoughts of safety. I can tell you that my members are not interested in the Cotton Candy approach that looks good, smells good, but melts in your mouth and turns to nothing when consumed. They are interested in discussing the lack of

bathroom facilities, rats in stations, unruly passengers, operator assaults, what to do when a passenger spits on you, the lack of police presence throughout the system and the list goes on and on and on.

My testimony today is not about laying blame and pointing fingers. It is instead intended to begin a discussion that includes everyone: my members, WMATA, you, and the people who ride the buses and trains every day. It is about developing the expertise and trust of all employees so that a situation, like the 12th, can be handled in the safest possible way, each and every time. We have attached a sheet with suggestions that we feel can begin to address the institution of a safety culture at WMATA. Local 689 is, as always, dedicated to the safety of our members and the riders.

Thank you for your time.