



Top Stories

Politics

Local

Business

World

Arts & Living

Sports

Opinions

Going Out Guide

[Home](#) » [Local](#)Tools:  SMS |  E-mail**Metro puts more workers at risk of 'at will' firing**

Rick Hartley, principal engineer for B& W Pantex, testified at the NTSB's hearing.

By Ann Scott Tyson

Friday, Feb 26, 2010

Metro's board of directors increased on Thursday the number of employees who can be fired "at will" in what officials described as an effort to improve safety at the troubled transit agency.

The decision expands from 75 to 235 the number of Metro employees who can be terminated without cause at any time. The move extends the policy from senior managers down to mid-level supervisors. Metro has about 10,000 employees.

The goal is "to increase accountability across all levels of management and supervision for the safety of employees and riders," Metro officials said in a statement.

The board decision came as the National Transportation Safety Board concluded a three-day hearing into the cause of the June 22 Red Line crash that killed nine people. The safety board plans to issue a formal finding about the crash's cause before the one-year anniversary. The hearing included pointed questions about safety lapses at Metro and testimony about oversight of subway and light-rail systems across the country.

Since the June crash, four workers have been killed on Metro's tracks and a subcontractor was electrocuted while working at a bus garage. The agency has also had a string of other accidents, including a November crash at a Northern Virginia rail yard and the Feb. 12 derailment of a Red Line train that was on the wrong track.

"This has been an excellent hearing. We got new information, important factual information, and that is one of the very significant parts of the hearing. We are here on a fact-finding investigation," said Robert L. Sumwalt, chairman of the hearing. "We are here to learn from this tragedy . . . so it does not happen again."

In his closing remarks, Sumwalt thanked the 21 witnesses who gave testimony.

On Thursday, NTSB investigators and Metro officials heard from a panel of experts on "high-reliability organizations" that emphasized the need for an organizational culture that allows managers to learn from frontline employees what the problems are and how to fix them.

"You don't know what's going on until [employees] tell you what's going on," said Rick Hartley, principal engineer for B&W Pantex, which handles security for the nation's nuclear weapons stockpile. "It's kind of scary."

Union officials said, however, that Metro's culture has focused more on punishing mistakes than on learning from workers.

"There's a lot of discipline . . . punishment instead of trying to find out what the problem is," said Jackie Jeeter, president of Amalgamated Transit Union 689, which counts thousands of Metro employees as members.

"People are afraid and reluctant" to speak up, Jeeter said in an interview, stressing that Metro employees do not trust the company's management. "That has been the systemic culture here."

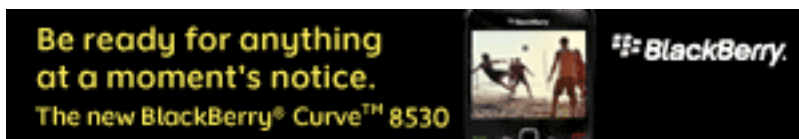
The first step in creating a culture in which employees are empowered to solve problems is educating leaders, Hartley said. "When the boss goes out to the shop floor, that gets trust started," he said.

At a Metro board meeting Thursday, Chairman Peter Benjamin also underscored the importance of soliciting ideas from employees in his first formal statement in his new role. He was elected in January.

"Most important, safety involves people: establishing a culture of safety and an attitude of attention to safety," he said. "This, in turn, requires that not only our customers but also our employees feel valued, respected and listened to. Nothing will substitute for a commitment to safety by the people in the field who actually are at risk."

Metro's safety problems have triggered upheavals in the agency's leadership, including the resignation of General Manager John B. Catoe Jr. and congressional and Obama administration efforts to overhaul transit oversight nationwide.

Tools:  SMS |  E-mail



Local

- [Metro will upgrade electronics, repair door controls on rail cars](#)
- [Fenty administration proposes required cardboard, plastic recycling](#)
- [Big surprises come in suspicious packages](#)
- [High winds down trees, darken traffic signals](#)
- [The day a Navy Band's music was painfully silenced](#)

• [More Local](#)

[Home](#) | [Top Stories](#) | [Politics](#) | [Local](#) | [Business](#) | [Arts & Living](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinions](#) | [Technology](#) | [World](#) | [Nation](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Going Out Guide](#)

[About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#) | [Sign Up for News Alerts](#)

[View the Full Web Site](#)

© Copyright 1996-2009 The Washington Post Company

Powered by Mobiletech