

The train wreck at Eschede, Germany

The terrible cost of privatisation

Editorial Board
1 July 1998

'As with every human undertaking, technology is never perfect.' With these words, spoken June 21 at the main funeral service in the town of Celle, the president of Germany, Herzog, sought to divert attention from those responsible for Germany's worst ever train catastrophe. In reality, the dead and injured in the derailment four weeks ago were victims of the profit orientation which has been the principal priority of the German railway system since privatisation at the end of 1994.

One hundred people, including many children from Bavaria on their way to a Whit holiday, died horribly when, on June 3 at 10:59 a.m., the high speed train--ICE 884 from Munich to Hamburg--derailed near the station of Eschede in the German state of Niedersachsen. The train was moving at more than 200 kilometres an hour at the time of the accident. Besides the dead, 88 suffered injuries. Many severely injured passengers are still lying in hospital.

According to tests carried out by the National Railway Office, the indisputable cause of the accident was an internal fracture on a wheel on one of the leading passenger cars. The tyre broke away from the wheel six kilometres before the site of the crash and the train derailed when it hit points in the track. One of the rail cars crashed into the pillar of a bridge, which collapsed and buried a part of the car under it.

The National Railways Committee expressed its shock at the accident, declaring that such a crack in the tyre of a wheel had never happened before, that the train had been serviced just one day before the disaster, and that this type of accident was impossible to predict. However, the facts tell another story.

The development of the German high-speed train (ICE) took place in the midst of a race to catch up with French and Japanese competitors. From the very

beginning the safety problems involved in the type of wheel employed were well known.

In 1988 pressure tests made by the Fraunhofer Institute for Physics in Darmstadt showed that the rubber suspended wheels used in the accident-stricken ICE train tended to crack and break. Railway experts participated in these tests, in other words, the Railway Board and the National Ministry of Transport were well aware of the dangers.

In 1991 the first edition of the ICE trains were equipped with Monoblock, that is, 100 percent steel wheels. However, they caused the trains to vibrate and rattle violently on the old type of tracks, which were not designed for the new, heavier trains. Nevertheless, in order to reduce costs and avoid losing time in the race against competitors, the Railway Board decided not to transfer the ICE trains onto completely new tracks or equip the trains with the special suspension devices employed by all of the other countries running high-speed trains.

Instead, in 1992, for the sake of 'comfort,' as the railways claim today, they reverted to the rubber suspended wheels of which the Fraunhofer Institute had warned. The railway board regularly countered warnings of possible cracks in the wheel tyres by referring to ultrasound tests, which made it possible to establish material fatigue in time. The concerns raised by railway employees were rejected on the grounds that this type of wheel had a survival quotient of 99.9 percent.

After 1994, however, the Railway Board stopped the ultrasound tests. Only new wheels were checked, not those on trains already in service. This was justified on the grounds that dirt on these wheels made precise measurements impossible.

Maintenance workers have confirmed that the wheels

were checked merely with a 'torch and optical inspection' and by 'tapping'. A recent study by the technical research unit (TÜV) concluded that the regular inspections 'could be improved upon,' but this report has been kept under lock and key up to now.

In 1995 the train engineering specialist Gottfried Birkel presented a proposal for electronic control of the wheel tyres, whereby it would at least be possible to detect any distortion of the tyre during travel. This would enable the engineer to brake the train on an emergency basis. The railway board rejected the proposal on the grounds of cost. But the engineering magazine, *VDI News*, reported a short time ago that systems which control the wheel in the course of travel have become standard equipment.

The ICE train involved in the accident only had an electronic system to report blocked toilets and insufficient toilet paper. It lacked such equipment for the most sensitive part of the train--the interface between wheel and track. Undetected, the damaged wheel was dragged along for almost six kilometres before it caused the accident.

Since the middle of 1997, test reports from the Thyssen subsidiary for technical measurement and quality in Kassel showed substantial quality failures in the rubber suspended wheels of both new trains and those already in service. Roland Heinisch, who is responsible for technology for the German Railway Board, has admitted to the transport parliamentary inquiry that the board had not ordered these reports.

That same year a tyre broke on one of Hannover's city trains. Although the fractured wheel was similar to those used on ICE trains, the Railway Board did not seek improved safety measures.

A lawyer in Hamburg, Rosenkranz, has laid charges against the former railway head Heinz Duerr, as well the present head of the board, Johannes Ludewig. He accuses them of having ignored the well-known risks in this type of wheel tyre in order to rescue their high prestige project, the ICE. Rosenkranz claims to have inside information that damage to wheel tyres is to be found in nearly one out of every one hundred freight trains.

The railway accident at Eschede throws a grim light on the privatisation of the railways. The government has single-mindedly pursued this project since German reunification in 1990, which brought together the West

German and East German railway networks. Actual privatisation began on the first of January, 1995.

The lives and welfare of railway workers and rail passengers have been sacrificed in a criminal way in the interest of profit. The latest figures issued by the German Railway Company show that the real beneficiaries of privatisation have been the company board and a few big share holders, while rail passengers have been subjected to continually rising prices and declining safety standards, and rail workers have born the brunt of massive job losses and intensified working conditions. During the period from 1994 to 1996 the number of railway employees fell by almost 50,000, from 336,000 to 288,000. Over the same period profits rose from DM 491 million to DM 721 million, an increase of 46 percent.

This enrichment of a few at the expense of workers and passengers would not have been possible without the energetic support of the opposition Social Democratic Party, which voted for privatisation. Likewise the railway union, the GDED, has acted as a junior partner of the Railway Board and pushed through all of the attacks on wages, jobs and working conditions.

Even in the aftermath of the tragedy at Eschede, the bureaucrats of the GDED have come forward as a bastion of defence for the Railway Board. Just a few days after the accident, as evidence was mounting of a broken wheel tyre, the press spokesman of the GDED, Hubert Kummer, declared, even though he knew better, that ultrasound tests were being carried out once or twice a week. Asked if privatisation had led to a drop in safety standards, he declared with a straight face: 'Privatisation made possible one of the biggest investment programs in the history of the railways, and this was also beneficial for railway safety' (*Berliner Zeitung*, June 6, 1998).

Also available in German



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact