

Death toll could be as high as 100 in London rail crash

Mike Ingram
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As rescue workers resumed their search Wednesday for bodies following the rail disaster at London's Paddington station, it was feared that as many as 100 passengers could be dead.

The front carriage of the inbound First Great Western express train that was hit by a three-carriage commuter train as it left Paddington station Tuesday morning is believed to have contained up to 60 passengers. It is feared that more dead could still be trapped underneath the wreckage, as rescue workers await the arrival of a 100-ton crane to move the debris.

Relatives face an agonising wait. It could take up to two days to carry through the removal and identification of the bodies. The extent of the injuries in some cases will mean they will only be identifiable by dental records, DNA tests and fingerprints.

Many more passengers have been reported missing than have been accounted for. At Reading station in Berkshire, where many of the express train passengers would have boarded, more than 150 cars remained in the car park. Normally only about 50 vehicles would have been left overnight.

Of the 150 injured taken to hospital Tuesday, 18 were still in intensive care Wednesday and dozens more are suffering from serious injuries. The accident could yet be the worst, in terms of deaths, since a crash at Harrow and Wealdstone in West London in October 1953, when 112 were killed and 340 injured, after two express trains collided and a third ran into the wreckage.

Passenger pressure groups have reacted angrily to the Paddington crash, saying that rail companies had placed profits before lives and ignored repeated warnings that a Clapham-style disaster could happen again. The Clapham Junction disaster of December 1988 saw 35 people killed and 113 injured. Two

commuter trains collided when a driver correctly stopped to report a faulty signal. Many of the victims died as a third train crashed into the wreckage.

Since 1988 there have been six fatal crashes on Britain's railways, including that at Southall in 1997 when seven people died and around 150 were injured as an InterCity train from South Wales ploughed into a freight train in almost exactly the same spot as Tuesday's Paddington crash. A total of 22 passengers and five railway staff have died in the 11-year period. Five died at Purley in March 1989 when two trains collided. Just two days after this, two Glasgow suburban trains collided head-on along a single track, killing two people. In August 1990, a driver died and 35 passengers were injured in a two-train crash at Safford station. Two commuters died and 240 were injured later that month when a train ran into buffers at Cannon Street station in Central London. Finally, another head-on crash at Newton station near Glasgow killed four and injured 22.

After it became clear that the number of dead in the Paddington crash would almost certainly exceed the 36 people killed at Clapham, Stan Davison of the Capital Transport Campaign said, "The only reason they could possibly have for not implementing safety measures is money.

"Anything that makes inroads into their profit margins leads them to make judgements on maintaining profits at the level they want and they are doing it at the expense of safety."

With one driver confirmed dead, and the other officially "missing, presumed dead", press articles Wednesday morning began to speculate that "driver error" could be the cause of the crash. The most common cause of serious accidents in the past has been drivers passing signals on red. On subsequent

investigation, many of these have proved to be the result of signal failure.

Others have been directly due to the deteriorating safety standards and attacks on Britain's rail workers. Drivers have repeatedly complained of being forced to work long hours and over-extended stretches of days. They warn that this induces a dangerous level of fatigue. In a phone-in on BBC Radio 5 Live a driver complained:

"People keep blaming the drivers, but we are only human. People get tired and can't do their jobs." He said that some years ago the privatised rail companies had agreed a shorter basic working week with the drivers, "but with all the companies that I have worked for, drivers are pressurised to work their days off. Many drivers are working 13 days out of 14." He added that some night shifts could last 10 or 11 hours.

Investigations into the Paddington crash are to concentrate on the behaviour of the Thames turbo train "following reports that it passed a signal at danger", it was announced Wednesday. A statement from Railtrack and the two other rail companies involved said the signals concerned in the accident were "in full working order". But it has emerged that the signal involved in the Paddington disaster has been the subject of repeated complaints by senior rail managers and drivers, who say that it cannot be seen clearly.

Eight trains in the past six years are known to have missed the signal when it was on red. Drivers reported that they have frequently missed signal 109 when it is showing red, and train companies are believed to have complained to Railtrack—which assumed responsibility for signals under the privatisation agreement—that the signal is partly obscured by a pylon.

Safety officials have been informed of a number of incidents at the spot since 1993, seven of them involving commuter services run by Thames Trains and its British Rail predecessors passing the signal at red. In February 1998 a First Great Western express service passed the signal, putting it on a collision course with a London-bound Heathrow Express train. Fortunately, the driver of the Great Western train was able to brake in time and the two trains stopped about 200 yards apart.

Responding to the growing anger of commuters and rail workers, the train drivers union Aslef has said that it will ballot members for strike action unless rail

companies respond positively within seven days to demands for improved safety measures.

The union is demanding the nation-wide installation of a fail-safe automatic train protection (ATP) system as well as in-cab radios. The installation of ATP, the cost of which is currently put at £1 billion, was recommended by the Hidden report into the 1988 Clapham Junction disaster, but was ruled out in the mid-1990s by the then Tory government. The Labour government announced this summer that a network-wide train protection warning system (TPWS) would be fitted. The cost of Labour's preference is £150 million. Aslef leader Mick Rix said, "Some people have branded TPWS as a 'Mickey mouse' system. I would not say that, but we really need ATP."



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