London rail disaster—interim report fuels rail safety controversy

Mike Ingram
9 October 1999

Britain's worst rail disaster in decades appears to have been caused by a local commuter train passing through a red danger signal, according to an official report from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) released Friday afternoon.

In its interim report on Tuesday morning's crash, the HSE says that the service operated by Thames Trains passed signal 109 when it was set to red outside Paddington Station in London. The train subsequently collided with the front carriage of an inbound express service run by Great Western.

The total number of dead still remains uncertain. Anguished relatives await the identification of remains. So far 30 bodies have been recovered, but only a few of these have been identified. Among the first to be named were the drivers of the two trains and an aide to Northern Ireland Secretary Mo Mowlam.

Brian Cooper, a 52-year-old father of two from Hayes, West London, was the driver of the Great Western express. He was identified Thursday from his clothing and documents he was carrying. The driver of the Thames Train had already been named as Michael Hodder, also a father of two. Anthony Beeton, 47, also killed in the crash, was a senior government official who had helped in the drafting of the Good Friday Agreement and had been the architect of a new human rights and equality commission in Northern Ireland.

"Analysis of data tapes suggests that the signalling equipment is unlikely to be at fault", the HSE report says. It adds, "The reasons why the train passed the red light are likely to be complex." Early evidence suggests that the accident "would have been prevented by the installation and correct operation of a Train Protection Warning System (TPWS)", said Chief Inspector of Railways Vic Coleman.

The HSE has served Railtrack with three Improvement Notices relating to signalling. It has also written to Great Western about continuing to use Automatic Train Protection fitted on some of its trains, and has told all train operating companies to re-brief drivers on signals passed at danger.

The instruction to Great Western lends a revealing insight into the attitude of the company towards rail safety. The company was fined £1.5 million in July for not activating Automatic Train Protection (ATP) on a train that crashed at Southall two years ago with the loss of seven lives. The HSE report has confirmed that despite this, ATP was not being operated on the Great Western express at the time of the Paddington crash.

Though said to have no direct bearing on this specific case, given that the Great Western train had been given a green light, it does reveal the contempt with which the company holds directives from the HSE, even when accompanied by a £1.5 million fine.

Railtrack, the company that gained control of the tracks and signalling when British Rail was privatised, fares no better, as the more fundamental causes of the crash become known. The company had received complaints on several occasions that the now infamous Signal 109 was hidden from the view of drivers. It had planned to change the signal later this month. This is six months after an independent report recommended the siting of low-level signals on the 109 gantry as an extra help for drivers. It has taken six meetings since April for the change to be approved. Railtrack had previously claimed that to change the signal would confuse drivers.

The industry has already been heavily criticised by the Railway Inspectorate for an increase in Signal Passed at Danger (SPAD) incidents. These were up 8 percent last year, to 643. In an unpublished report on SPADs, the Inspectorate blames Railtrack and the train

© World Socialist Web Site

operating companies for the increasing number of incidents. It says remedial action has been inadequate, but has taken no action to punish those accountable.

Great Western has said that due to the introduction of the Heathrow Express between Paddington and Heathrow airport it had asked for its high-speed trains to be moved to another track on approaches to London. Crash investigators are now examining whether changes to the track and the erection of new signal gantries could have contributed to both this and the Southall crash.

Given the fact that over 100 people remain missing, a central question thrown up by the crash is why carriage H of the Great Western train suffered such severe damage. The company has said that it ran the trains on industrial diesel with additives, which are highly inflammable, to prevent it from freezing in winter. Diesel spilled from fuel tanks ruptured in the crash and was ignited, producing an inferno of over 1,200 degrees. This fire and heat reduced the bodies trapped in the carriage to virtually unidentifiable ashes.

Four days after the accident, only 30 out of a possible 127 bodies had been recovered from the crash. Rescue workers have been hampered by the instability of the wreckage and have been working to construct a 100-ton crane to enable them to move the Thames train from on top of the front carriage of the Great Western express, where the majority of victims are believed to have perished. It has now been reported that at least part of the reason for this is that the front carriage of the Thames train was made from aluminium rather than steel. This reduces fuel consumption and thus increases the profits of the company, but at a deadly cost to rail passengers, as the Paddington tragedy illustrates.

Britain's rail safety record is one of the worst in Europe, and it invests just 0.9 percent of GDP on transport infrastructure. Figures for 1986-90 produced by the international union of railways show that 36 passengers died for every 10 million passenger-kilometres travelled in Britain, compared to 27 in France. The French government is planning to invest a further £5 billion in the state-owned rail service by the end of this year.

The Paddington disaster has produced a political crisis in Britain that goes far beyond the issue of funding. The crash and others before it have led many to place the blame on the impact of privatisation, initiated by the Tories but enthusiastically pursued by Labour.

Further indication of the crisis facing the Labour administration was given in Friday's *Financial Times*. After reporting that the government has been put under pressure to order investment of around £1 billion for the introduction of ATP, the paper said that Deputy Prime Minister Prescott had expressed doubts about its effectiveness. "From what I have seen of ATP, I am not convinced about its effectiveness or that it is fully proven", Prescott said.

Significantly, the paper cites Prescott as saying that he will implement the recommendations of Sir David Davies of the Royal Academy of Engineering, not those of Lord Cullen's independent inquiry as he had said previously. This tends to confirm the suspicions raised by the *World Socialist Web Site* that the Davies investigation into safety is designed as a counterweight to anything Cullen may propose.

Furthermore, Prescott has qualified his earlier promise that "money is no object", stating that whatever system is introduced, there was no commitment from public funds. "The obligation is on the industry to provide it", he said. This has placed Prescott at odds with Railtrack, who argue that his estimate of £1 billion is only half the real cost of ATP implementation. Even at £2 billion, however, this is still peanuts to a company that makes £1.2 million in profits a day.

Moreover, the Railway Development Society user group pointed out that the fall in Railtrack's share price since the crash had "lost the company more money than ATP would have cost". Campaigns director Alix Stredwick said, "Railtrack has a huge public relations budget.... Perhaps it should transfer some of the money to infrastructure investment on safety and capacity."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site