

London Underground signalman: "Train operating companies view safety provisions as a drain on profits"

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In the aftermath of the Paddington rail tragedy, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to John Casey, a signal worker on the London Underground, about the adverse impact privatisation has had on safety on the national railways and his concerns about Labour's privatisation of the capital's subway system.

WSWS: It has become customary to attribute the number of fatal rail collisions to "human error". How do you respond to this?

JC: Calling accidents the product of human error is meaningless until the overall working conditions are taken into account. A driver of a train is part of a working environment. If that working environment does not contain any "fail-safes" for when an accident or defect occurs, technical or human, then the driver is the victim of the working environment.

Working conditions revolve around making profits for the bosses. It is written into the terms of employment that a railway employee cannot make public any concerns they may have about working conditions within the company, including the contravention of safety standards. Any worker doing so is deemed to be in breach of their contract and can be dismissed. With the national railways being owned by separate and competing companies, a worker faces a continuous pressure to place commercial interests above safety concerns.

The train operating companies view the costs of safety provisions as a drain on profits. Railtrack, which owns the tracks and signalling and leases their use to the train operators, is a prime example. This is why it has been so resistant to implementing such fail-safe measures as Automatic Train Protection (ATP), a computerised system which overrides the commands of a driver if a train passes a red signal by automatically applying the brakes.

Every inquiry into train collisions since 1988 has recommended that this be installed. In 1995 a company memorandum opposed this, stating, "cost-benefit analysis is the key to the decision, but it is up to the board to consider factors such as public opinion and corporate image."

This system of measurement is one in which a financial restraint is placed on saving lives. The installation of ATP was seen as impacting negatively on the companies' share price in the run-up to floatation on the stock exchange.

In its current six-month report to shareholders Railtrack mentioned safety only once. On page four of the report, out of the 10 priorities cited by shareholders for the company, safety is omitted.

WSWS: The interim report on the Paddington disaster states that the signal was displaying at red. How is it that the driver of the Thames Turbo train jumped the red signal and entered onto a collision course with the Great Western high-speed train?

JC: The sunrise is not taken into account in the placement of signals, and Railtrack does not check the visibility of the signals. This applies to all signals on the network, but particularly on the Western Zone where the majority of main lines run east-west, so allowing the sun to reflect on the signals. This is a well-recognised danger and is referred to as a "phantom aspect".

There is already evidence to show that the driver of the Turbo Train had acknowledged two yellow signals, had slowed the train and was prepared to stop. But as the driver approached the red light at signal 109, he picked up speed again. With the sun directly reflected on the red light, this could have been misread as yellow—which means, "proceed at caution". The speed at which he then travelled was 54.7 mph, which is in line with this instruction.

Other hazards included overhead electrification masts obscuring the signal. Signal 109 has been the centre of much controversy. Over the last six years it has been overrun eight times when displaying a red light. Three of these involved the signal being "disregarded"—that is unsighted—and three misjudged or misread. Only one month before the crash, Railtrack was due to install a track side duplicate signal at eye level, but this was not carried out.

The technology exists for any signal to be clearly visible from any distance, regardless of external conditions. In-Cab signalling enables the driver to know the setting of signals ahead, with or without visibility. Duplicating signal 109 with an aspect at eye level is only a cheap, unreliable and short-term measure. It can only complicate matters at busy junctions, where a multitude of signals are hung over the tracks from gantries and must be read in a short space of time. There is nothing to guarantee that these would not become subject to the same "phantom aspect" phenomenon.

On top of such poor design and faulty equipment, a driver must also contend with working unsociable hours. The driver of the train would have been obliged to wake up at around 3:45 a.m., in the middle of the night, in order to arrive at work two hours later. No attention is paid to the issue of fatigue and how this can jeopardise safety.

WSWS: The track layout has been described by a source closely involved with the investigation as "an accident waiting to

happen”. He said that, “Once he [the driver] went through the red light the layout provided a pit for him to fall in—and nothing to stop him. Despite the red light, the next three sets of points all allowed him to travel straight on for 700 metres and head on into the express where the lines converge.” Could you explain how this has arisen?

JC: “Points” are a special track that can be moved sideways, a flexible section of track.

Points can be set in two positions: the normal position sets them so that traffic flows without track change; the reverse position sets points so that traffic changes tracks. Fail-safe points, however, always come back to their initial position, so that traffic does not change tracks or derail. This exists presently on the London Underground.

Previously on the national railways there was a system known as “semaphore signalling”. This was a safety provision that ensured that a signalman could not set up a conflicting movement. If the points and signals at Paddington had been designed to ensure that the path of the Thames Turbo train could not be set unless the signal for the Great Western train was red, then the collision would not have occurred.

The sole reason for scrapping this was cost-cutting. To maximise line capacity the number of trains which pass over a particular stretch of line during a specific time, points on Railtrack and even on parts of London Underground remain in the last position set. This is so that time between trains is not lost to set points for the same route. However, this increases the likelihood of train collision, particularly in peak-time traffic.

Maximising line capacity is the latest concept in management of the railways. A train is seen as a profitable unit. Having a constant running cost, the more full trains there are on a line, the more profitable it is for both the train operators and Railtrack. The Central Line on London Underground relies on 72 trains to displace half a million journeys a day. More trains could be introduced, but profits would fall. The result is that peak-time trains are filled to capacity and resemble little more than cattle trucks. During off-peak hours, fewer trains are operated resulting in longer waiting time.

WSWS: The number of signals passed at danger (SPADs) have increased by 8 percent over the last year. What are other factors that can contribute to this increase?

JC: The increase you cite is a general one. In fact, the number of serious SPADs—incidents that involved a train overshooting a zone and entering a dangerous stretch of track—increased by 24 percent. This can be due to the deterioration of rolling stock, such as faulty breaks, worn points, as well as the factors I mentioned before.

Track and signalling renewals have declined by 1.3 percent since Railtrack took over from British Rail. Track renewal was half the 1995 figure last year. Besides the technical problems, SPADs can increase due to longer driver shifts, shorter rest periods and other measures to increase productivity. For instance, high-speed trains now have only one driver, whereas before there was always a co-driver in the cab. This was in recognition of the difficulties one driver faced in remaining constantly aware of trackside hazards and following repetitious signals at high speed.

WSWS: How has the privatisation of the national railways into

competing companies increased the potential for collisions?

JC: Portioning up the rail network leads to the partitioning of safety standards. Each company does what it deems economically realisable to ensure large dividends for the shareholders. Hence local, fast and freight routes are all mixed together. Since companies compete against each other for passenger and freight services, their respective timetables and route planning come into conflict.

In September 1997, a Great Western high-speed passenger train passed a red signal and collided with an empty freight train at Southall, just a little further down the track from Paddington. This claimed the lives of seven people and injured hundreds.

The fail-safe devices on the Great Western train were not working. Such a collision would not have been possible before privatisation, as regulations did not allow for freight trains to cross the path of passenger trains. This regulation was removed to attract freight companies onto the rails.

WSWS: How do you feel about the Labour government's plans to privatise London Underground?

JC: Labour has already assured Railtrack it will receive the franchise for running the subway's surface lines. This was done without a rival bid. The danger that what has happened on the national railways will be reproduced on London Underground are very real. A private company already carries out maintenance of the tracks.

I am against all forms of privatisation. Built and financed publicly by workers, London Underground is going to be given away to the bosses so that they can make mega-profits. Fail-safe systems will be discarded because they demand personnel for regular maintenance, shift hours will increase, rest periods between shifts will shorten. Both working conditions and travelling conditions will worsen and already high fares will soar.

See Also:

Second rail collision follows London, Paddington disaster
[20 October 1999]

Privatisation, deregulation and the London rail disaster
[14 October 1999]



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