

Train drivers boycott crash line in aftermath of Norway rail disaster

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Train drivers in Norway are refusing to travel on a line where two trains collided Tuesday, killing at least 16 people. The drivers said they would only use the track when safety systems were upgraded, or all the small stations along the line were fully staffed. Stein Olsen, national safety representative for Norway's 1,100 drivers, said that his members would refuse to travel along the line with its current signalling and technical systems, which he described as "not good enough".

The boycott was announced as rescue workers continued to search the scene of the crash between an express train travelling south from Trondheim, carrying 83 people, and a local train from Hamar.

The accident happened outside the remote Aasta station, about 180 kilometres (110 miles) north of Oslo. Reports indicate that the local train may have passed through a red light prior to the collision, in which both trains were travelling at speeds of 80-90 km/h (50-56 mph). The crash was so severe that several rail cars were compressed into a pile of metal the length of a single car.

Both drivers are thought to have died in the crash. Police say that 67 people are believed to have survived the accident, leaving a possible total of 33 dead. If this figure is confirmed, the crash will be the worst ever in Europe, outnumbering the 31 killed in the Paddington train crash in London last October. Already it appears set to be the most serious accident on Norwegian rail lines since 1975, when 27 people were killed in a crash in the same area.

The state railway company has said there were no signs of technical faults on the signalling system, but several reports have emerged justifying the drivers' concerns over safety. Officials admitted that the line lacked some modern safety controls used on other lines

in Norway, such as the Automatic Train Protection (ATP) system that automatically stops a train if it passes a signal at red. Both the trains ran on diesel, rather than electric power. On Norway's electrified network external controllers can simply turn off the power to stop trains in case of danger. The only way to stop a diesel train is to contact the driver by mobile phone. In the case of the Aasta crash, rail service operators have been quoted in the Norwegian media as saying they could not find the correct phone numbers in time to warn the drivers.

Fires that blazed for about six hours hampered rescue work at the crash site. Five dead bodies were pulled from the wreckage by Wednesday evening, and the current total stands at 12 with at least four more on the train. The police, who said there was no hope of finding more survivors, had revised the figure of four missing and presumed dead down from 20 earlier in the day without any explanation. Children from a local school on a shopping trip for the last day of the Christmas holiday were initially feared to be among the 33 possible dead. Several of those believed missing later returned safely, but at least one 12-year-old girl is thought to be among the remaining dead. Of the 30 passengers and crew who were injured, 12 were hospitalised, some with broken bones.

Rescue workers spoke of horrific scenes at the crash site. "We had to abandon people who were screaming in the carriages," said Ola Sonderal, a member of the first ambulance crew to arrive at the scene. "It was the worst thing I have experienced, going through the train seeing people who were alive and conscious who we couldn't help," he added.

It took 50 firefighters and 150 members of the Norwegian Army nearly six hours to extinguish the fire raging at the crash site. When flames from the

wreckage subsided, rescue work was still hampered by a new fall of snow and temperatures as low as -15 degrees Celsius. Despite the cold, a tanker continued to pump water onto the wreckage to prevent a potential re-ignition of the fire.

The exact cause of the crash is not likely to be known for some time. Safety experts investigating the Paddington rail disaster are to share information with their counterparts in Norway. A meeting of international rail inspectors will take place later this month. The meeting was scheduled prior to the Norwegian disaster, but will now focus on a joint investigation of the Norway and Paddington crashes.

There are obvious similarities between the two accidents. Both involved a train passing a signal at danger and resulted in coaches being destroyed by fire. This latest tragedy adds weight to those arguing for the immediate introduction of ATP on Britain's railways. The lack of this system, which exists on much of Norway's rail network, directly contributed to the deaths at Aasta.



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