

Death of four in Hatfield train derailment highlights safety issues on Britain's railways

Mike Ingram
20 October 2000

Just one year after the Paddington rail disaster, Britain was again alerted to the appalling lack of safety on the rail network as a train travelling from London to Leeds derailed at 115mph near Hatfield on Tuesday October 17.

More than 35 passengers were injured and four killed when the Greater North Eastern Railway (GNER) train came off the tracks on a sweeping bend. Injured passengers crawled through broken windows and others had to be cut free by emergency services. Eyewitnesses said it was amazing that more people weren't dead.

Police arrived at the scene in full armour and helmets, as the news networks reported that Scotland Yard had received a telephone call just 48 hours earlier from a man vowing to bomb the East Coast main line. Whatever the truth of these reports, they played a crucial role in the crisis management operation that came into swing immediately following this latest tragedy.

Early news reports focused almost exclusively on the possibility of the derailment being due to "terrorism" or an act of vandalism. These were repeated even after reports that anti-terrorist forces had inspected the track only hours before the derailment.

Reports quickly emerged, however, that the most likely cause of the accident was broken track. The company responsible for track maintenance, Railtrack, was forced to admit, "Whatever the cause of the accident, the condition of the track was not good."

Railtrack's admission was followed by a carefully worked out campaign to avert the type of broad public outrage that accompanied the Paddington tragedy, when 31 passengers died. Railtrack Chief Executive Gerald Corbett offered to resign his £400,000 a year post declaring, "I am distraught that another tragedy has occurred on our railways."

Railtrack's board almost immediately turned down his pro-forma offer. A statement issued Wednesday said, "Mr Corbett is the person best qualified to lead the company in the search for all root causes of the disaster and the responses. Rail quality improvement has been led vigorously by Mr Corbett and that effort must be followed through by the company."

Rupert Murdoch's tabloid *The Sun* went further declaring, "In an age when too many politicians have clung to their jobs when they ought to have gone, Corbett has shown a rare quality—a sense of honour." It emerged later that Railtrack's shareholders had been informed prior to Corbett's resignation offer being made public in order to allay fears of a negative impact on share prices.

Corbett's resignation offer and Railtrack's predictable refusal to accept were, as former senior operations manager with British Rail, Peter Reynor, put it, "a good piece of public relations." In the aftermath of the Paddington disaster, survivors and relatives of the dead were demanding the resignation of the entire Railtrack board. This time Paddington victim Pam Warren publicly urged Railtrack not to accept the resignation of Corbett. At a press conference of the Paddington Survivor's Group, which she co-founded, Warren said, "We're beginning to have a working relationship with Mr Corbett and Railtrack and from our viewpoint there's no point in bringing in a new chief executive. We have had, and still have our differences with Railtrack—but we believe Mr Corbett has a job ahead of him."

Reynor is concerned that the speedy admission of responsibility over a broken rail will be used by Railtrack to block any serious enquiry into more fundamental causes of Tuesday's tragedy. "I'm worried that Railtrack's broken rail admission will somehow

neuter the inquiry into the Hatfield crash. Just as a signal passed at danger merely triggers the start of an inquiry, news of a broken rail should just be the beginning of a full investigation." Reynor called for the enquiry to focus on why there were no systems in place to prevent the accident. "The system has broken down and it's no good everyone saying that a broken rail was the problem and nothing else needs to be done," he said.

Whatever the intention, Railtrack's admission of a broken track as the cause of the derailment has once again illustrated the incompatibility of a private rail network run on the basis of accumulating ever greater profit, with the interests of passengers and basic public safety.

One Railtrack boss admitted that a temporary speed curb on the track would have "vastly" cut risks of a tragedy and the company has since ordered a 50mph-speed restriction on any similar stretch of track. Given that problems with the Hatfield track were known about since January, the obvious question is why no such action was taken earlier? Balfour Beatty track assessors first noticed faults in the two-mile stretch of track where the derailment occurred in January 2000. At this time a decision was made that the track needed renewing, but no re-railing work began until May. In September, grinding work was carried out designed to prolong the life of the track and prevent cracks. A visual check of the line was carried out on October 10 and no action was taken. The actual re-railing is not due to take place until November.

Director of Railtrack Southern, Michael Holden said such a schedule is not uncommon. "Putting the thing into the system in January and actually doing it in November is not untypical. Sometimes the time lag is a lot longer," Holden said. "You can't run change rails while you are also running trains. There is competition either to maintain the track or to run trains on it."

An examination of the recent record of Railtrack with regard to track maintenance make clear what wins out in this "competition". In 1996-97, the annual number of broken rails was 739. By 1998-99 this figure had risen to 988 and the provisional figure for 1999-2000 is 949, despite pledges by Railtrack that reductions were a priority. In the immediate aftermath of the Paddington crash, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) wrote, "Rail breaks on the Railtrack infrastructure rose from

2.75 to 3.31 per million train miles.

"This increase is very disturbing, given the sudden and substantial nature of the rise, especially since Railtrack's own predictions forecast a significant reduction."

Immediately following the Hatfield tragedy, the *Guardian* newspaper ran a column, which asked, "So is privatisation compatible with rail safety?" The author claimed, "Despite Tuesday's tragedy death is still, mercifully, a rare event on the railways". They add with almost Olympian detachment that there "was some increase [in accidents] but not much since Railtrack was sold off in 1996".

The *Guardian* article then asserts, "Profit is not necessarily incompatible with putting safety first," pointing out that accidents are not good for business. The author was referring to the 91p drop in Railtrack share values to 1025p following the derailment. The article asserts that what is important is not ownership but "lines of accountability". It then lists the regulatory measures contained in Labour's new transport bill along with a commitment of £60bn investment over the next 10 years. What all this talk about "lines of accountability" attempts to gloss over is that neither now, nor with the passing of the transport bill will the great majority have any control over the way in which basic public amenities such as transport are run. Profitability will remain the sole criteria governing whether or not the rail network is made safe.

See also:

Paddington train disaster inquiry hears how rail companies "put profit before safety"

[20 May 2000]



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact