

Austria's Kaprun railway disaster reveals lack of safety measures

Richard Tyler
16 November 2000

The terrible fire on the Kaprun funicular railway has exposed a criminal lack of safety procedures. The death toll now stands at 158. It is believed that 155 died in the tunnel. Poisonous fumes that poured out at the mountain top station engulfed three more.

On Sunday November 12, the train, which is pulled by a cable along tracks up and down the mountain, stopped after travelling just 600 metres into the 3.2km-long tunnel. Within minutes a raging inferno developed as the tunnel, which rises at nearly 45 degrees from the Kaprun station up to the Kitzsteinhorn glacier, acted like a chimney drawing in oxygen to fuel the flames.

There was no sprinkler system to put out the flames, fireproof emergency refuges or an evacuation tunnel through which the passengers might have escaped. There are also conflicting reports about whether the train's doors remained closed, sealing passengers into the burning train.

Manfred Mueller, the head of technical operations for the company running the railway, said the driver was told to open all doors after an alarm sounded. After another five or 10 minutes radio contact was lost. But a German survivor said the doors had jammed, trapping passengers inside. "They screamed as they tried to prise open the doors and smash the windows," he said.

"All I wanted was to get out and I only managed to escape by the skin of my teeth because a window was kicked open, letting me battle my way out."

Only twelve people travelling on the train escaped with their lives, as they descended the narrow stairs running alongside the track and avoided the smoke and fumes that overcame all those who tried to make their way upwards, or were trapped inside the carriage.

The final identification of the victims will take several days, during which DNA tests are carried out on the charred remains. Because of the high temperature

reached in the tunnel many bodies have been reduced almost to ash.

The dead include whole families, many young people and children enjoying a skiing holiday at the popular resort. The vast majority of the victims were Austrians, but 37 Germans were also killed, as were 10 members of a Japanese tourist group and five US soldiers who were on holiday.

Traditionally, a large snowboard party takes place at Kaprun during the second weekend in November. Initial press reports spoke about snowboarders carrying flammable liquids or fireworks, which are banned, but forensic experts have found no trace of either.

On Tuesday a previously unknown molten substance was found on the tracks that may have played a role in the fire. It is not yet clear whether it is melted plastic from the train, or some sort of lubricating grease that may have been overheated by a defect in the running gear and burst into flame. Some witnesses report that the fire broke out before the train entered the tunnel.

Austria's Transport Ministry has halted the operation of five other funicular railways in the aftermath of the disaster, so that they can be inspected for safety, but government spokesmen have been quick to try and play down the significance of the blaze. Wolfgang Eisl, tourism spokesman for the Salzburg state government, said, "The fire in the tunnel of the Kitzsteinhorn railway was a unique event, that was not foreseen in any way".

However, evidence is emerging that cutbacks and rationalisation in the funicular railway and cable car industry may have contributed to the disaster. Edwin Engle, chairman of the Institute for Railways and Funiculars at the Technical University in Vienna, expressed scepticism about building more funicular railways through tunnels. He told *der Standard* that

Austria's funicular railways had been neglected for a long time, "because they are not so spectacular as cable cars."

Former Transport Minister Caspar Einem admitted to Austrian daily *Die Presse* that he was aware of severe staff shortages in his department dealing with safety checks for the country's more than 3,000 funicular railways, cable cars and ski lifts. "Yes, it was a failure that we did not do anything about." Einem, who was Minister from 1997-2000, said there were just 11 technicians responsible for overseeing the testing and safety of cable-railways, cable-car and ski lift operations.

A 1997 report from the office of Austria's Auditor General criticises the railway authorities in the Transport Ministry, which it says, "has for years not fulfilled its tasks or only partially completed them... They failed to carry out the official checks of the railways".

Under Austria's social democratic-led government, cutbacks meant that safety inspections were often contracted out to private companies. Regulations prescribe an official inspection of all funicular railways every five years, with yearly inspections carried out by the operators themselves. The Kaprun funicular railway received its last government safety check in 1997.

The enormous growth of tourism in the Alps means funicular railway and cable car operators seek to transport far more visitors than their operations were originally intended for. In the Kaprun case, witnesses agree that the train was filled to bursting point, which impeded a rapid escape.

Funicular and cable car travel in Austria has grown rapidly over the last ten years, reaching over 550 million passenger journeys a year. According to the employers' association, turnover in the 97/98 rose by 8.7 percent to 10.84m schillings (\$920,000). This is set to rise again in 99/2000, not least due to a "partnership" between the cable car operators and Coca-Cola, which concentrated its entire marketing activities on promoting winter sports in Austria, with a budget of around 30m schillings (\$2.6m).

An industry magazine says that in face of "intensified competition" there is a need for "more flexibility in employing the necessary personnel". Regulations introduced with the agreement of the government in 1998 mean that fewer staff are required to oversee the

operation, which the trade unions complained would "lead to a massive loss of jobs." The same year, the unions agreed to a contract that accepted flexible working, a cut in wage increments and a meagre pay rise of just 1.9 percent. In contrast the industry received some 300m schillings (\$25.5m) in subsidies for improvements to their operations.

In 1999, the Austrian cable car operators association held a number of seminars about crisis management. These concentrated on how best to deal with the media, since "negative press reports can lead to a drastic loss of turnover". The success of this cynical media strategy can be seen in an article in *Die Presse* headlined "German criticism (still) within limits".

"Other than after the Glatür avalanche catastrophe [in which 38 died], the media are treating Austria more fairly—at least the serious quality media. This time, the accident is not regarded as the occasion for massive criticism, but to raise the question about how safe are similar German mountain railways."

The Kaprun disaster was not "unavoidable," as an editorial in Austria's *Der Standard* claimed, but is the product of faulty design, safety cut backs and the unrelenting competition for the content of the tourist's wallet.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact