

Two derailments on London Underground in 48 hours

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22 October 2003

Two London Underground (LU) train derailments took place last weekend within 48 hours of each other. The first occurred near Hammersmith, West London, on the evening of Friday, October 17, and the second in Camden Town during the early hours of Sunday, October 19. Seventy-six passengers escaped injury in the Piccadilly Line Hammersmith derailment, while seven people were injured in Camden Town. Five suffered cuts and bruises, and two were retained in hospital—one with a head injury and the other with a broken thighbone.

The derailment at Camden Town caused the rear carriage to be detached and hurtled into the wall of the tunnel. Over 200 people had to be escorted out of the station and the derailed train, and as many again rescued from two other trains stuck in tunnels.

Witnesses spoke of people emerging from the station blackened by soot, bleeding, frightened and extremely angry. Pieter Brans, 17, one of 80 Dutch students on a school trip in the train behind the one that crashed was quoted in *The Guardian*: “We were trapped around 20 minutes. People were starting to feel unwell. There was a lack of oxygen and they were getting dizzy.”

Others reported people screaming and panicking in the total darkness that followed the accident. Camden Town station is very busy on weekends, with thousands of shoppers heading for the popular markets.

The Northern Line remains closed, and it is expected to take some time to be reopened, causing chaos for London Tube travelling workers. The Northern Line is one of the busiest in London. In 2000, it carried 206.1 million passengers. It runs from the South East to the North West of London, covering 58 km (36 miles) and serving 50 stations.

Both incidents are thought to be the result of breakage in the trucks and faulty signals points. The

points that failed at Camden Town had undergone maintenance by a private contractor, Tube Lines, the previous night, while the broken rail thought to be responsible for the Hammersmith crash had also been inspected the previous night by engineers from Metronet.

The two latest incidents take the number of derailments in London Underground this year to four. A derailment that took place in January at Chancery Lane, Central London, injured 32 people and kept the Central Line closed for 11 weeks. During the summer, an engineering train came off the line at Acton Town.

Under the government’s Public Private Partnership (PPP), maintenance of the Tube has been switched to private contractors Tube Lines and Metronet.

Back in 1998, a 30-year contract was awarded to a private-sector consortium, Seeboard Powerlink, to fulfil the tube network’s power needs, which critics say will not provide adequate power to run hundreds of new, high-tech, air-conditioned trains and carriages. A further £300 million, 20-year contract was awarded to Connect for a radio system that would allow controllers to talk directly to train drivers. At present, in many instances, line controllers have no way to communicate directly with drivers. In the event of a breakdown or crash, the driver must leave his cab and walk down the track to plug a phone into the nearest socket mounted on the tunnel wall.

Ken Livingstone, the former Labour MP who left to successfully stand as independent candidate for mayor of London, is responsible for that part of the LU that manages trains and stations and has overall responsibility for safety. Before taking over as mayor, he had said he believed the network was unsafe. Earlier this year he stated, “Everyday there isn’t a fatal accident at London Underground is another day when

we're lucky."

He told BBC Radio 4's "Today" programme that he would seek emergency legislation from the government to suspend the maintenance contracts. He warned, "It might be that this isn't the result of the partial privatisation. It could be that we have just had 19 years of under-investment in the underground. But all my instincts are to suspect that it may be the problem, that there are too many firms involved, too much delegation."

In a press release following the Camden Town derailment, Livingstone said, "I have asked London Underground to conduct a full inquiry into the causes of these incidents and what must be done to ensure that they cannot happen again. What we know at the moment is that Tube Lines—the PPP consortium of Bechtel, Amey and Jarvis—were working on points in this area last night. We will know more when our engineers are able to examine the train and track. At present they are not being allowed to do so by the Government Health & Safety Executive, who authorised the PPP on the grounds that it was safe."

Bob Crow, general secretary of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), said he would recommend a strike ballot unless the PPP was dismantled. He blamed the cuts made by private contractors: "Track walks to check the tracks used to be done every day—now they are only done once a week."

A spokesman for the union said, "We came close to people being killed down there. Are they going to wait for bodies to be carried out?"

Members of the train drivers union Aslef had complained about track problems at Hammersmith and signal failures in Camden Town over the recent weeks. However, these are not isolated incidents. There have been countless accidents in Britain's railway system that have cost the lives of several travellers and that are still being investigated today. One of the firms involved in the maintenance of the Tube, Jarvis, has been forced to pull out of the railway maintenance contract.

The same types of problems have emerged in every industry where privatisation took place. On August 28, there was a power cut in London that lasted 34 minutes, but caused chaos and disruption that could still be seen the following day. The outage left 250,000 people stranded after finishing work, and brought the London Underground to a virtual standstill. Since then, several

other shorter power failures have occurred, usually in the middle of the night.

National Grid Transco (NGT), which emerged out of the privatisation of Britain's power system by the Conservative government in 1990, admitted that the workforce had been reduced by half in an "efficiency drive" since privatisation.

The water industry does not fare any better. Levels of leakage from water mains remain high despite repeated promises of investment. The situation is particularly bad in South London, where several thousand homes were without water for five days in August and others were flooded. This was the latest incident in a series of bursts and floods that included the closure of the North Circular Road—one of London's most important routes—for several days in 1999 causing traffic chaos.

Thames Water is also involved in the LU. On April 3 of this year, Trevor Jones, managing director of Thames Water UK & Ireland, declared in a press release: "Thames Water today welcomed the finalisation of the contracts which will transfer two-thirds of London's Underground infrastructure network to the Metronet consortium. The company (Thames Water) will invest £70 million in the project, through its 20 percent share holding in Metronet, and will also participate in substantial supply chain contracts drawing on the company's core skills."

The privatisations initiated by Thatcher's Conservative government have continued apace under Tony Blair's Labour government. The London Underground, together with the National Health Service and Education, are being prepared to be sold off. As a result, the negligence of the state-owned utilities maintenance has been intensified by the private rush for quick and easy profits. Cosmetic repairs are conducted while the core of the ageing infrastructure continues to deteriorate.



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