Turkey’s train wreck: a tragedy rooted in the drive for profit

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A new express train linking Istanbul to Ankara derailed on the evening of July 22 in the country’s northwest, killing 38 and leaving 80 injured.

The service was personally inaugurated in early June by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, despite warnings by engineers that the country’s decrepit rail tracks were not suitable for high-speed trains.

A brief historical overview shows that underlying catastrophes such as this in Turkey is capitalism’s subordination of the country’s economic development to the most short-term profit motives, at the expense of infrastructure and basic safety.

Much of Turkey’s rail system dates back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Since then, only a few lines have undergone renovation and no new lines have been added. Even Transport Minister Binali Yildirim admits this: “Investment in the rail system was suspended after 1950. The total length of track laid between 1950 and 2004 totalled no more than 1,700 or 1,800 kilometres. In addition, the track and cars have not been provided with maintenance for 30 or 40 years.”

The laying of tracks, which peaked in 1930, slowed after World War II and ceased entirely in the early 1970s, before completion of the network envisioned by the Turkish State Railways (TCDD). After 1950, Turkey shifted its resources from railroads to road building, and no government since had paid attention to improving the rail system. That was until this most recent initiative, which, just few weeks after the introduction of the new service, resulted in a major tragedy.

Road transport represented about 37 percent and rail 55 percent of total transport in 1950. In 1950, Turkey had around 1,600 km of hard-surfaced roads. In that decade alone, another 5,400 km were built with US assistance. At the same time, building and maintenance of railways came to a sudden halt. By the year 2000, roads carried 93 percent of all intercity transport in Turkey, rail about 4 percent, water about 2 percent and air 1 percent.

In short, past governments in Turkey have systematically concentrated on building roads while neglecting the railways. The major reason for this is a shift from economic strategies centred on national infrastructure to those focused on foreign investment, the free market and private capital. The import-substitution strategy pursued between 1950 and 1980, which was designed to make the country an independent producer of manufactured goods, failed to achieve its proclaimed aims and was gradually abandoned. The more the economy developed, the more dependent Turkey became upon the world economy and consequently upon Western credit and investment.

Production of trucks and buses was carried out in cooperation with multinational firms like the West German company Mercedes-Benz. In 1951, the government introduced a law to encourage foreign investment in Turkey. Also in the early 1950s, foreign experts—mostly from the US—prepared reports recommending that Turkey focus on road transport. The US assisted financially and technically in the building of roads.

At the same time, the role of state planning was cut back in favour of “the market.” Soon after its establishment in 1960, the powers of the State Planning Office (DPT) were curbed. Short-term economic growth, as well as favours to Turkish and foreign companies and other competing private interests, were more important than the systematic long-term development of productivity.

This also explains why Turkey leads the world in fatal road accidents. Turkey’s accident rates are three to six times those of countries in the European Union. About 7,000 people die each year in road accidents, and losses arising from injuries and damage to property are estimated to be in the order of 2 percent of GDP.

With the military coup of 1980, the import-substitution strategy was finally abandoned and openly neo-liberal policies adopted. In the second half of the 1980s, Turgut Ozal, a champion of neo-liberal policies and then Prime Minister of Turkey, condemned railways for being symbols of communism and praised motorways for symbolising freedom and free markets.

So the railways (TCDD) have become the largest money loser among the public sector enterprises.

Turkey's efforts to become a full member of the EU have changed the attitude of the Turkish government. Transport is one of the five major issues in the EU accession agenda (macro stability, labour, agriculture and the environment are the others). Of course, Turkey has deep problems in most areas, ranging from physical integration to the harmonisation of infrastructure, vehicles, environmental and other standards, the development of logistic networks, the improvement of border crossings and trade facilitation policies (modernisation of customs, etc.). In this respect, rail restructuring turned into a major issue. So, the AKP (Party of Justice and Development) government suddenly became "railway-friendly."

In an effort to comply with a three-year-old IMF-backed "stabilisation" programme, Turkey has been trying to reach its primary budget surplus target—excluding interest payments—of 6.5 percent. At the same time, the EU wants Turkey to privatise and liberalise its economy. These targets considerably undermine investments and social spending as non-interest budget expenditures are extremely limited.

Under these circumstances, the government decided to find a pragmatic "solution" to its transportation problems. It sought to create the impression that Turkey is improving its railways, but without making any significant increase in government spending. This was the "mission impossible" that created the tragedy of July 22.

The AKP government launched a so-called high-speed train project (with an average speed of 150 km per hour and 100-120 km in practice) between Istanbul and Ankara. The project essentially entailed a partial renewal of the existing line with some shortcut additions.

The trial run of the eagerly awaited semi-high-speed line between Ankara and Istanbul took place on June 1 in the presence of a group of excited journalists, proud administrators and beaming officials from the Turkish State Railways.

But experts who knew the condition of Turkish railways reacted immediately after the first trip. According to them, Turkey's current rail infrastructure and trains were inadequate to implement the project. Based on their assessment, the high-speed train service should have been stopped.

Troubled by the continuation of the high-speed train service, these experts expressed their concerns in meetings with officials from the Turkish State Railway Directorate (TCDD) and in statements to the media.

Professor Aydin Erel from the Yildiz Technical University Department of Transportation was one of those strongly opposing the project. At a press conference on July 5 in Istanbul attended by the minister of transportation, the professor revealed the information that he had received and the reasons for his opposition, while repeatedly warning of a crash.

TCDD officials issued a public announcement that the high-speed trains were not dangerous. They insisted that the route, locomotives and carriages were suitable and that the trains would continue to be used. But 14 experts who were not satisfied with the announcement continued to express their doubts. They were invited to a meeting at the TCDD on July 14 to explain their complaints. At the meeting, it was stated that there would be a further inspection of the carriages, locomotives and railway tracks. One week later the train crashed.

Shortly after the crash, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan dismissed calls for Transportation Minister Yildirim's resignation and scolded journalists. "Don't go too far and be aware of your limits!" he threatened them. "The first question you should ask may be the last thing that comes to mind. Have governments resigned, ministers been removed when these types of accidents occurred in Turkey in the past? Don't make ideological comments on the train crash!"