

Bus-train collision kills 37 in Sri Lanka

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A bus-train collision last Wednesday morning at a level crossing at Yangalmodara, about 66 kilometres from Colombo, which killed 37 passengers and injured more than 50, has exposed the crisis in Sri Lanka's passenger transport system.

At 8.15 a.m., a privately owned Colombo-bound passenger bus from Galkiriyagama, 150 km from Colombo, collided with an inter-city express train running from Colombo to Kandy. The bus was pulled by the train nearly 75 metres before bursting into flames. Reportedly, about 120 passengers were aboard the bus, which had seats for only 55.

Thirty-five people died on the spot. Injured passengers were rushed to government hospitals in Kurunegala, Kegalle and Polgahawela, while 10 critically injured passengers had to be transferred to Colombo National Hospital. Two later succumbed to their injuries.

According to eyewitnesses, when the bus reached the level crossing, the gate had been closed. But the bus conductor alighted and signalled the driver to drive the bus in a zigzag manner across the rail track to avoid the gate, despite the warnings of the gate operator. As the train approached, the rear half of the bus was still on the track.

It was later revealed that the bus crew took the risk to gain an advantage over another passenger bus following the same route. According to the gate operator, many bus drivers evade closed gates in this manner in order to beat their competitors and pick up extra passengers. Similar incidents have occurred before.

The United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government immediately indicated it would charge the driver and conductor with manslaughter. It has offered to pay compensation of just 25,000 rupees (\$US250) to the families of each of the victims.

By scapegoating the bus crew, the government and the media are trying to cover up the underlying causes of this tragic accident: the privatisation and decay of the transport system, the frenzied competition among private operators, and the miserable social conditions faced by bus crews.

Transport Ministry spokesman Udaya Manawasingha, quoting Minister Felix Perera, admitted: "One feels disillusioned over the Sri Lankan private bus service when seeing the way in which the accident occurred." He added: "In Sri Lanka around 2,000 to 2,200 people die in road accidents each year and over 500 of these accidents involve private buses."

According to a 2003 Central Bank Report, buses provide 80

percent of Sri Lanka's passenger transport. Private ownership dominates the field, covering two-thirds of buses. Desperate small operators predominate. Professor Amal S. Kumarage delivered a paper to a Workshop on Regulatory Impact Assessment organised by the Institute of Policy Studies last June, which showed that 18,000 buses are owned by more than 15,000 individuals.

Most of the owners have bought their buses with loans provided by banks or finance companies under leasing agreements. To avoid the seizure of their buses, they must pay tens of thousands rupees monthly. In turn, the owners place the bus drivers and conductors under severe pressure to meet these financial targets and earn something for their own living. These conditions have pushed bus crews into cutthroat competition.

Without fixed timetables, private buses on the same routes vie with each other for passengers. Often packed to capacity, private long distance buses are notorious for speeding and engaging in risky manoeuvres to stay ahead of rivals and to finish the trip in the shortest possible time. On Sri Lanka's narrow, crowded and poorly maintained roads, such driving inevitably results in accidents.

According to Kumarage's paper: "Presently most owners have little control over their buses. Some are leased for the day to third-party crews that are untrained and often unlicensed. Productivity is low, the costs are high and workers' conditions are dismal as many work up to 13 to 15 hours. Meanwhile, competition between buses has led to dangerous driving and as a result accident rates have doubled. There is no assurance regarding the quality of service..."

While leasing companies and banks secure their profits, bus crews are blamed for the high accident rates. Talking to the media after the latest tragedy, Private Bus Owners Association (PBOA) head Gemunu Wijeratne labelled the drivers and conductors as "animals, a useless group of people and drug users". He alleged that "between 25 to 30 percent of our daily income is stolen by the drivers and conductors, they never give us the full income".

His concerns are not the safety of passengers but the profits of bus owners. The crews face intolerable conditions. A conductor who had just left his job told the *Island* newspaper: "It is impossible to work. We are up from early morning till late night. We are scolded by passengers, the police and other authorities. At the end of the day, the bus owner shouts at us for

not earning enough income. It is a terrible life.”

More than 75 percent of the private bus employees are school dropouts. Most are rural youth who migrated to cities seeking employment. One young conductor, Saman, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “We have lot of economic problems at our homes. We send our younger brothers and sisters to school under very difficult conditions. So, I came to the city to find any job. Sometimes you get a job as a waiter and sometimes as a conductor of a bus. This job is very strenuous.

“We wake up at about 4.30 or 5 in the morning and work continuously the whole day. There is no specific time for the breakfast or lunch and we take them when we get a chance. After toiling on the highway for more than 12 hours we come to our destination around 8-9 p.m. There is no rest in between.”

Even then, the crews have to wash and clean the buses, until 10 or 11 pm. They may have a drink of alcohol as a temporary relief. Then they go to sleep, either in a cramped room shared between four or five of them or in their bus.

“The room is so uncomfortable, you can’t sleep there. It is always full of cigarette fumes. Rooms are so small and ventilation is poor. One cannot sleep because often home comes to the mind,” he said.

Any failure to meet their owners’ income targets would risk their sacking. “We always try to load as many passengers as possible. This leads to confrontations with passengers, sometimes fisticuffs. But if we fail to meet the target, we would be thrown out of the job. In this desperate situation, we have to clash not only with passengers but with our colleagues too. We know that a minor fault in our part may cause a mortal accident but we have been pushed into that situation.”

National Transport Medical Centre president Dr Gamini Karunanayake explained how the strenuous working conditions cause accidents. “Any driver needs a good sleep after eight hours duty. He must be in sound health. That is not enough and he must be sound in his mental condition too. If the driver is not up to the said norms, accidents are possible due to distractions of the mind and shivering hands.”

He added: “After an accident the particular driver must be submitted for a medical scrutiny and it is compulsory. I don’t agree with the police deciding on that matter. It poses a big disadvantage to the driver.”

Sunil, a small bus owner, pointed out how the owners are pushed to press employees for income targets. “The daily income is around 5,000 rupees. Fuel costs about 1,200 rupees and another 1,000 rupees must be set aside for the leasing installment and 800 rupees for wages. We must save enough to spend 7,500 rupees monthly for maintenance. In addition, 15,000 rupees a month must be saved for tyres, brake liners and other spares.”

These conditions point to the fact that the systematic destruction of state-owned public transport system by successive governments and the resultant domination of private ownership have created a death trap for passengers. The right-

wing United National Party government, which came to office in 1977, took the initial step by dismantling the centralised state transport service and allowing private capital into passenger transport. Later, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led Peoples Alliance (PA) government continued these policies.

The Central Bank Report for 2004 admits: “The quality of road passenger transportation showed no significant improvement in 2004 and the shortcomings prevailing during the last few decades continued to loom large. Inadequate service, poor quality and increasing number of accidents were the weaknesses in the public road transportation service.”

The report shows that the remaining government-run bus companies are continuing to decline. In the 2003-04 period, the kilometres operated by the state bus companies declined by 11.4 percent from 334 million to 296 million. Passenger kilometres declined by 16.7 percent from 17,446 million to 14,537 million over the same period.

It is similar with the state-owned railway system. The report states: “By the end of 2004, SLR (Sri Lanka Railway) had only 131 locomotives and power sets although it required 153 to provide satisfactory service. Most of the locomotives and power sets are over 25 years old while 75 percent of the coaches in the stock are over 15 years old. The operations monitoring system covers only a part of the network and has not been updated.”

Commuters have to travel in trains crammed full to the lowest step of their footboards in morning and evening rush hours. Some passengers even travel in toilets and guardrooms. Sometimes passengers travel on the roofs of coaches, risking their own lives.

The Kumaratunga government’s response to the latest disaster demonstrates that nothing will improve for the masses under the economic order maintained by her government and its UNP predecessors. Last Wednesday’s tragedy raises the necessity for socialist policies: a high quality public transport system in which the safety and facilities of the passengers have first priority, not private profit.



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