Eurostar breakdowns: Thousands imperilled by corporate indifference

Robert Stevens
28 December 2009

Channel Tunnel operator Eurotunnel and train operator Eurostar have engaged in mutual recriminations over events during the week leading up to Christmas that saw hundreds trapped for hours, and tens of thousands delayed.

In a statement to its shareholders issued on December 25, Eurotunnel said it was "clearly not to blame for these failures." Complaining that "we have been unfairly criticised for not having reacted correctly," the statement pointed the finger at train operator Eurostar—claiming that its staff had acted "in total disregard of safety procedures."

Eurostar has responded in kind, blaming Eurotunnel for the myriad communication and evacuation problems that occurred following the breakdowns.

The argument typifies corporate indifference to passenger safety and welfare as the companies involved attempt to shift responsibility to each other for a significant transport failure that has major safety ramifications.

On December 18, four London-bound Eurostar trains from Brussels and Paris broke down while inside the Channel Tunnel. Another, also travelling to London, broke down at the Thurrock Viaduct in Kent, southeast England. A sixth train broke down the following day.

Eurostar is operated by several British, French and Belgian rail companies. The Channel Tunnel is 30 miles long, beginning in Kent and ending at Pas-de-Calais department in northeast France.

The breakdowns resulted in more than 2,000 travellers being trapped 250 feet below the English Channel without light, air-conditioning or access to adequate food and water supplies, medication or toilets.

Once the trains had broken down, rather than a well-oiled emergency plan being swung into operation, passengers were left to fend for themselves. The ensuing chain of events could have led to fatalities. That this did not occur is due to the actions taken by the passengers themselves, who did everything they could to help one another in the most traumatic of circumstances.

Many passengers described the terrible ordeal they and their families suffered while trapped in inhumane conditions for up to 16 hours. According to one report the temperature rose to 40C (104F), in the absence of air conditioning on the trains.

One said, "We were desperate as we couldn't breathe in there and it was like a sauna but all we were told on the intercom was to 'inhale less and keep seated.' I asked two other passengers to help me break down the door to get out. We had to make a break for it for the sake of the children. It was a shambles."

A 17-year-old student said, "Everyone thought they were going to die. People were passing out because of the lack of air. Then someone came round and told us to stop breathing heavily because there wasn't enough oxygen for everyone. It was horrendous—like being trapped in a chamber of death."

One of those trapped recalled, "We had two toilets between 1,800 people. They wouldn't open the other toilet because there was no flushing water and it was seeping with excrement."

Lee Godfrey, who was travelling with his family, said, "The evacuation procedure we followed was one we set down ourselves because there was no one to help. When we disembarked from the train, we had no lights. That was very scary for the children and the older people.

"There must have been 150 people on the floor of our carriage and there was only one toilet which did not have any paper in it. We nicknamed it the cattle truck."

As the scale of the crisis that was unfolding became clear and in response to the developing anger of the passengers, Eurostar eventually "evacuated" the passengers.

First some 500 of the "most vulnerable" people trapped on two of the stranded trains were taken out of the tunnel in an operation that was chaotic and clearly unrehearsed. Passengers including pregnant women, disabled people in wheelchairs and hundreds of parents with young children were hoarded onto a cramped Eurotunnel shuttle train normally used to transport cars.

Following the breakdowns, Eurostar suspended its services for three days as it investigated the cause. Some 75,000 people had their trips cancelled and an estimated 100,000-plus people were stranded in France and England as a result of the delays.

The contrast between the passengers who were involved in the unfolding disaster, who did all they could to help others, with the response of airlines and ferry companies spoke volumes about their priorities.

Immediately following the news that thousands of people were trapped under the English Channel, airlines and ferry operators increased their prices so as not to miss the chance of making a quick buck. Flights from London to Paris escalated to as much as £1,100, as distraught passengers sought to find alternative ways of travelling. Recognising the widespread hostility to this profiteering, the *Economist* magazine noted that the airlines were "making a killing on Eurostar passengers' misfortune."

The 2,000 or so passengers who were trapped and faced such

© World Socialist Web Site

terrifying conditions have only been offered a ticket refund, token compensation of £150 and a free replacement Eurostar rail ticket that must be used within two months. A Eurostar commissioned review is now being carried out into why the trains broke down and is due to report by the end of January.

Following initial tests by its engineers, Eurostar said that the breakdowns occurred due to the trains leaving the freezing cold air in France and then entering the warmer tunnel. This meant that "fluffier" than normal snow crystals were able to penetrate, via condensation in the tunnel, into the electricity panels on the trains. As a result the electricity panels short circuited and cut the motors, Eurostar said. Engineers also found that the current snow screens and "membrane" shields on the trains needed to be enhanced.

According to Nick Mercer, commercial director of Eurostar, the "winterisation modifications" used on the trains had failed due to the "exceptional" weather conditions.

While it appears the case that there were major design modification faults involved, the UK Meteorological Office said that the sub-zero temperatures around Calais on December 18 would have actually prevented the type of snow cited by Eurostar from forming. The Met Office said, "You only get fluffy big flakes of soggy snow when the temperature is near freezing. At lower temperatures, it becomes very dry, hard and crystalline, not sticky, more like little lumps of ice."

Eurotunnel has claimed, "Our tunnels are kept at a constant temperature of 20C, it never varies. This is a Eurostar problem, not a Eurotunnel one and they are wrong to blame us."

Whilst the precise technical causes of the breakdowns are yet to be determined, the only conclusion that can be drawn from the events of December 18 is that the safety of thousands of people did not feature prominently in the calculations of either Eurostar or Eurotunnel. A number of important questions remain to be answered. The most fundamental is why didn't Eurostar or Eurotunnel have satisfactory contingency planning in place for such an emergency, including the necessary standard evacuation procedure?

There has yet to be any adequate explanation as to why further trains were sent into the tunnel after the initial breakdowns. The decision to send in additional trains under these conditions was a major dereliction of a duty to public safety and was detrimental to any rescue effort to be mounted. Once so many trains had been allowed into the Tunnel, this jeopardised and delayed by many hours the towing away operation of the failed *trains* by diesel trains.

The short circuiting of the electricity systems was not an unknown issue. In February 1996, the electrical system on a train failed, again during a period of cold weather. In March 2007 more trains broke down due to electricity faults during a cold period, after cladding was removed.

If it was the case that the gap between the temperature outside the tunnel and that inside was so large and "unprecedented" during the latest breakdowns, one has to ask why such a major and potentially life threatening hazard was never anticipated or dealt with effectively in any planning, despite previous similar incidents.

It needs to be asked: Why was there a total breakdown in communications between Eurostar and Eurotunnel and between them and the trapped passengers? From initial news reports the Eurostar train drivers were not able to be contacted while they were inside the tunnel. It would also appear that there was no communication back-up plan in place in the event of communication being lost.

Over the past decades, there has been a systematic turn away on the part of governments and big business from the maintenance of basic infrastructure and safety precautions. Transportation systems have been particularly hit in Britain. Railway workers are currently in dispute with Network Rail, which maintains the railway infrastructure, over plans to shed 2,549 jobs.

As competition is intensified in the provision of lucrative contracts, maintenance and staffing costs will continue to be slashed. The competition to provide train services across the Channel Tunnel is set to be amongst the fiercest. From the beginning of December a new European Union directive came into force opening up all railway routes across European borders to competition.

One of the companies expected to make a bid for Channel Tunnel services is the French company Veolia, which is preparing a joint venture with the Italian state railway firm Trenitalia. Reports suggest that Veolia/Trenitalia are planning to offer services between France and Britain from 2012 and also between Paris and cities in Italy, Switzerland and Germany.

According to a report in the December 24 *Independent*, "Veolia hopes, however, to undercut the French railways SNCF and Eurostar by negotiating lower wages, longer and more flexible working hours and cheaper pension deals with its drivers and other train staff."

The Eurotunnel train breakdowns demonstrate that as long as turning a profit remains the only criterion for providing vital services, then more dangerous, life threatening events, including those with tragic outcomes, are inevitable.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site