

Belgian rail workers take wildcat action over safety fears after fatal collision

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Workers on Belgium's rail network took wildcat strike action yesterday following the crash between two rush-hour trains near the capital, Brussels, the previous day that left 18 people dead and almost 200 injured.

Rail workers said that their spontaneous walk-out was due to concerns over safety conditions on the network and deteriorating working conditions, including a shortage of personnel that meant another accident such as the one at Halle, just 15 kilometres from Brussels, was likely.

According to reports, train drivers, signalling staff, machinists and technicians are all involved in the action. Depots across the country were blockaded, causing widespread disruption to train services, particularly in Wallonia in the south.

Rail officials said the strikes could continue for several days, compounding widespread disruption to the network, including routes connecting some of the major cities in Europe.

The SNCB said that 85 percent of its depots were affected by the strike. There were mass cancellations of trains and international services. Eurostar and Thalys, which run between France, Germany and the Netherlands, said that they would be unable to continue operating normal routes.

A train driver was among those killed on Monday, while the other driver is in a serious condition in hospital, awaiting police questioning. The trains had been travelling from Leuven to Braine-le-Comte, and from Quievrain to Liège, when they collided outside Halle at around 8:30 a.m. The accident is the deadliest Belgian train accident since 1974, and the death toll was expected to rise yesterday as bodies still remained to be excavated from the wreckage. Initially, authorities stated the death toll would be at least 25.

A contributory factor to the anger of rail workers

were initial reports seeking to blame the accident on drivers' negligence. Even before the black boxes contained in each vehicle have been examined, the Belgian national railway company, Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Belges (SNCB), claimed in a statement that the collision had been caused by one of the drivers failing to stop at a red light, and then hitting the other train at high speed.

The SNCB was later to admit that while the line on which the crash occurred is fitted with a security system that automatically switches on a train's brake at every red signal, one of the trains was not equipped with the crucial safety feature. Marc Descheemaeker, chief executive of the SNCB, said that although the company had decided to fit all its trains with the safety system seven years ago, in 2005, "That can't be done all at once."

Luc Lallemand, vice-chairman of the network operator Infrabel, said that the safety system "won't be completely installed until 2013." Asked if the crash could have been prevented if both trains had been properly equipped, he replied, "Yes. It could have been avoided."

Monday's crash is the third major accident on Belgium's rail network in a decade. In 2001 a head-on crash involving two commuter trains in Pécrot, outside Brussels, killed eight people. That incident was blamed on language communication problems between a Flemish-speaking signalman and a French-speaking colleague. In 2008 more than 40 people were injured when a commuter train travelling in the wrong direction hit a freight train in central Belgium.

Citing Lallemand's comments about the current train crash, the Belgian daily *Le Soir* wrote, "[I]f he is right, responsibility for the accident would fall to the SNCB which, 10 years after the Pécrot catastrophe, has still

not equipped its trains according to experts' recommendations at the time."

The unofficial walkout began Tuesday morning in Leuven, where the deceased train driver, now identified as Johan de Keyzer, 36, lived, and spread to the rest of the network.

Le Monde said the rail workers' action "was an implicit criticism of the trade unions who, the night before, met with management and Transport Minister Inge Vervotte, without calling for work stoppages."

Union representatives denied that the walkout had official backing. Jos Dignette, for the ACOD rail union, denounced the strike. The *New York Times* cited Dignette stating that what had started as an "understandable emotional reaction" by drivers to Monday's collusion had taken a counterproductive turn.

"The situation is not good," Dignette said. "I don't understand why some have decided to declare war at this moment."

Dignette added that drivers in northern Belgium were threatening to continue the strikes.

A rail official was quoted as saying that "the devastation" caused by the collision of the two trains, carrying an estimated 300 people in total, was "enormous." The impact was so great that the front carriages were forced into the air, damaging overhead power lines. Most of the dead were in the front carriages. Investigators are continuing to scour the wreckage amid fears that more fatalities could be found.

Reporters described doctors treating some of the injured at the scene of the crash, including performing amputations, while the "walking wounded" were taken to a nearby sports centre for basic medical care.

Luciaan Spiessens, a retired station manager at Buizingen, was in the front carriage of the smaller train and gave the *Het Belang van Limburg*, a regional newspaper, his account of the accident. He described how the injured driver had suddenly "began honking [the train's horn] very hard," just prior to the collusion.

"I knew immediately that it was serious," Spiessens said. "A fraction of a second later, he hit the emergency brake, then the driver jumped from the door of his cab into the gangway.

"After the crash, the driver was with us in the wrecked carriage. There was a young man lying

apparently lifeless on the ground. The driver was not seriously hurt, and he tried everything to bring the young man back to his senses. It worked.

"When I was freed a little while later, I saw the driver standing outside the train. He was crying, probably because he then began to fully realise what had happened."

Another passenger, Hambaoui Mounir, said, "The first two carriages were completely squashed. I was in the carriage right behind. The train fell to one side, people fell over each other, there was no air and women and children were screaming."

Sebastien Duckers, 23, a passenger on the train heading towards Brussels, told the BBC that he had boarded just two stops before the crash at Braine-le-Comte on his way to work in the capital when, "Suddenly there was a loud bang, and I was thrown forward and hit my head on the seat in front of me.

"Thankfully I was not hurt and stood up immediately to see people thrown around the carriage. Everyone was frightened and there was a lot of crying and screaming. We were all in a state of shock.... The train station staff and police were on the scene very, very quickly. They shouted into the carriage, instructing us not to go out onto the tracks as there was a risk of electrocution after many live cables had fallen on the tracks."



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