

Ten people die in German train crash

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3 February 2011

Ten people died following a head-on collision between two trains in the east German state of Saxony-Anhalt late Saturday evening. The accident took place on a single-line track between the towns of Magdeburg and Halberstadt. It could have been prevented if safety devices, such as those that are commonplace in west Germany, had been installed.

At 10:30 p.m., a small commuter train run by a private rail company collided at Hordorf with a 2,700-ton freight train loaded with quicklime. The commuter rail car containing 35 passengers was torn to shreds by the force of the impact and tossed off the tracks. Experts compared the collision with that of a small car hitting a tank.

The commuter train was carrying a number of young people, likely on their way to a nightclub in Halberstadt. Two of the 23 injured, including a 10-year-old girl, were still in critical condition as of Tuesday. Only three of the 10 dead had been identified by Tuesday evening, including two men aged 63 and 74 years, and the 35-year-old driver of the regional train.

According to a report by the Transport Ministry to the parliamentary Transport Committee, the 35-year-old driver of the passenger train had prevented an even worse tragedy from occurring by rapidly braking, bringing his train speed down from 98 km/h to 66 km/h.

Politicians and railway managers immediately rejected any responsibility for the tragic accident and instead laid the blame on one of the two train drivers. Just hours after the crash, the prime minister of Saxony-Anhalt, Wolfgang Böhmer (Christian Democratic Union), declared that the probable cause of the disaster was the driver's failure to respond to a stop signal. The tachographs of the two trains had not been evaluated at that point, and police had no evidence to indicate whether the fault lay with a human or technical failure.

Since then, the website *Bild* the tabloid has cited a Transport Committee report, which declares that the driver of the freight train ignored two signals. After allegedly missing these, he failed to heed an emergency call from a traffic controller in Hordorf.

The state attorney is now seeking to prosecute the driver of the freight train, who suffered bruises and severe shock, on charges of manslaughter, negligent assault and endangering railway traffic.

It is always the same story in these cases. The cuts made by the country's main rail company, Deutsche Bahn (DB), are to be paid for by the rail workers and passengers. According to the GDL train drivers' union, there has been a huge increase in the workload of train drivers in recent years, a result of measures introduced by DB to maximise profits. These, in turn, have led to a shortage of personnel. Train drivers working for DB have accumulated 1.5 million overtime hours and 70,000 unused vacation days.

Edmund Mühlhans, a professor at the Technical University of Darmstadt and rail expert, told *Spiegel Online*: "In my view, the drastic austerity measures introduced by Deutsche Bahn are crucial. This accident should not have happened."

When accidents such as the current one in Hordorf happen, the first reaction of those responsible is to claim "human error", even though it is patently clear that the safety and lives of railway workers and passengers are being sacrificed at the altar of rationalisation and savings. The tragedy at Hordorf could have been prevented by simple safety precautions.

For many decades, there has been a system available to prevent precisely such accidents.

Known by the abbreviation PZB, the safety system, which was developed in Switzerland in the 1920s and 1930s, uses magnets to automatically stop trains if they

cross warning signals.

According to Karl-Peter Naumann, chairman of the passenger association Pro Bahn, only half of the stretch of track where the most recent disaster took place was equipped with PZB, despite the fact that it is heavily trafficked. While such security systems are “tried and trusted”, they have not been installed on many train routes in east Germany. In the western half of the country, however, such systems have long been standard, Naumann said.

In the words of a spokesman for Deutsche Bahn, the company “rigorously” rejected the accusation that it was responsible for the accident. To say that the accident could have been avoided is merely “outlandish speculation”, he said. The route network complied with legal requirements, as according to the law, safety precautions such as PZB are only required on routes with a top speed of over 100 mph. On the line where the accident took place, the speed is limited to 100 mph. According to DB, the company had begun to modernise the track in 2010 and planned, allegedly, to install PZB next month.

On Monday, DB chief Rüdiger Grube announced that the company had now decided to install PZB systems on all single-line tracks throughout Germany.

The chairman of the parliamentary Transport Committee, Winfried Hermann (Greens), reported that appropriate safety systems are lacking “not only on branch lines, but also on many main routes in east Germany”. According to Hermann, PZB systems have not been installed in sections of rail lines located in Nordhausen, Erfurt, Dresden, Cottbus, Halle-Eilenburg, Gera, Leipzig, Lubeck and Stettin.

The train accident in Hordorf is one of the worst in Germany in many years. In 2003, six people died when two regional trains collided in Baden-Württemberg, and nine died, with another 149 injured, in February 2000, when a night express from Amsterdam to Basel derailed at high speed in the North Rhine-Westphalian town of Brühl.

The worst train disaster in Germany since the Second World War took place in Eschede, when a high-speed ICE traveling from Munich to Hamburg derailed in Eschede, Lower Saxony, in June 1998. A total of 101 people were killed in the accident.

The reason why such accidents happen is not simply human error—or more precisely, if human error is involved, then such mistakes are directly linked to the process of rail privatisation aimed at maximising the profits of Deutsche Bahn.

Since 1994, the year in which DB was privatised, the workforce has been cut by half in Germany, from 385,000 to 180,000 employees. In the same period, billions have been saved in maintenance and infrastructure. The result is defective ICE and freight train axles, cracks in the wheels of double-deck trains, failures of air conditioning systems in summer and heating systems in winter. Savings in the sphere of infrastructure have resulted in dilapidated bridges, signals and switches, and defective tunnel rescue systems. The Berlin S-Bahn system is on the verge of collapse following years of cuts.

For years, the political establishment in Germany has been aware of the connection between the privatisation of the railway, reduced maintenance, poor service, decreased safety and an increase in accidents. However, none of those responsible in the DB executive have been held to account. Hartmut Mehdorn, who headed the company from 1999 to 2009 and is responsible for many of the disastrous policies implemented by DB, was paid an annual salary of €3 million. Following his departure two years ago, he picked up a severance payment of €4.8 million.

Once again in this latest case, the government is intent on blaming the driver, while DB executives get off scot-free. Federal Transport Minister Peter Ramsauer (Christian Social Union) has already declared that he attaches no blame for the accident to DB as the network operator, and Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) told *Stern* magazine that the floating of DB on the stock exchange remains a priority for her government.



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