

China's train crash evolves into a political crisis

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The Chinese government is facing a developing crisis following last month's high-speed train collision in Wenzhou that killed 40 people and injured nearly 200. The accident has triggered public anger over the regime's reckless drive for the breakneck expansion of high-speed rail at the expense of basic safety measures, as well as over official corruption and mismanagement of the country's infrastructure.

A stationary or slow moving Hangzhou-Fuzhou train was hit from behind by a Beijing-Fuzhou train on July 23, after the former apparently lost power due to a lightning strike. The signalling system to alert trains within four kilometres to stop or alter course apparently failed to work. Four carriages were forced off the elevated tracks and two others were derailed.

Public outrage was reflected among the country's hundreds of millions of Internet users, who voiced criticism on blogs and discussion sites. Comments targeted the railway ministry's rush to dispose of the wreckage and reopen the track within 36 hours. Questions were raised about a cover up by the ministry.

To placate public opinion, Premier Wen Jiabao showed up at the scene on July 28 to demonstrate concern by the country's leadership. "Those directly responsible for the accident, as well as relevant senior management, will be held to account to the full extent of Chinese law and regulations," Wen promised.

The following day, however, Beijing's central propaganda department issued an order to restrict media coverage of the crash. "All local media, including newspapers, magazines and websites, must rapidly cool down the reports of the incident," it

declared. Editors "are not allowed to publish any reports or commentaries, except positive news or information released by the authorities."

Family members of the victims have held several demonstrations demanding to meet top rail ministry officials. In order to stifle their criticisms, the authorities doubled compensation offers to 915,000 yuan (\$US143,000), hoping to buy their silence.

In a further effort to blunt criticism, the State Council last week promised a transparent investigation, not only of the train crash, but all other major emergencies related to public safety. The State Council also ordered the publication of certain details, including expenditure on major construction projects. As is widely known, former railway minister Liu Zhijun was dismissed earlier this year for taking kickbacks amounting to \$US125 million related to rail construction.

The "transparent" investigation is compromised from the outset, however. The panel features top rail ministry officials, including a deputy rail minister. Three of the experts involved, professors from Beijing Jiaotong University, are known as staunch advocates of high-speed rail. One is a director of Henan Splendor Science and Technology, an official supplier of rail signalling and monitoring systems. The panel's report is not due to be made public until mid-September.

As the Chinese government is acutely aware, anger over the Wenzhou disaster is a symptom of far wider social tensions. Even in recent days, several hundred train drivers employed by the Guangzhou Railway Group held a protest in Changsha's main train station on August 2 over excessively long hours and lack of

sleep between shifts that lead to extreme fatigue and put trains at risk. The authorities quickly dispatched mediators to end the strike and prevent disruption to the high-speed rail link between Changsha and Guangzhou.

In Hangzhou, near Wenzhou, 1,500 taxi drivers struck for days last week. They jammed traffic and surrounded a police station, demanding action on rising fuel prices and high cab company fees. They later demanded an independent union and adequate pensions. Several drivers were arrested. A small protest by taxi drivers also occurred in Shanghai.

The rail crash prompted warnings of the political danger of the country's deep social divide. Professor Zhu Lijia from the Chinese Academy of Governance told the *South China Morning Post* last week that the accident was “highly symbolic” of the current “blind faith” in rapid growth. He said China's rapid economic development was “dominated by a minority of the people and powerful interest groups” and warned “it will have a lasting impact on the nation that cannot be underestimated.”

Others have exploited the crash to argue for the dismantling of the rail ministry's monopoly. A comment on *Sohu.com*, a major news portal declared: “Such an industry ministry is no longer needed. It wastes people's money and doesn't respect lives.” The aim of this commentary is to bring the railways into line with other sectors, like aviation, telecommunications and energy, where government-backed companies are listed on share markets and open to private operators.

Such pro-market “reform” will only further undermine safety, as is graphically the case in the mining industry, where thousands of workers are killed each year in state-owned and private companies alike.

The rapid expansion of China's high-speed rail system is particularly sensitive as it was at the centre of the government's huge stimulus package following the global financial crisis that erupted in 2008. If the plan stalls, it will have serious ramifications for the Chinese economy. Chinese corporations are also marketing fast rail technology internationally.

China had just 650 kilometres of high-speed track in 2008 but that expanded to 8,358 kilometres last year—four times that of Japan, which is the second longest system in the world. The figure is expected to exceed 13,000 kilometres by the end of 2012—part of a major expansion of China's rail network from 91,000 kilometres in 2010 to 120,000 kilometres by 2015.

As a result, the railway ministry has already accumulated debts of over \$326 billion—or equal to 5 percent of China's GDP, up from 2 percent in 2007. Other elements of the rail system are unable to keep up. The first batch of bullet train drivers were given only 10 days training—compared with six months to two years in Western countries for similar tasks—according to the *People's Daily* last December.

In June, a former chief engineer in the rail ministry told the media that the German and Japanese rail technologies acquired by China were designed for a maximum speed of 300 kilometres per hour. But ex-railway minister Liu unilaterally lifted the limit to 350 kph—in order to boost the image of the trains and foreign sales. After Liu was dismissed in February, his successor Sheng Guangzu lowered the top speed, but insisted the decision was unrelated to safety concerns.

The chaotic character of the market-driven expansion of high-speed rail in China makes further tragic disasters all but inevitable.



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