

At least 80 killed in Spanish train crash

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On Wednesday night, at least 80 people were killed and 140 injured in Spain's worst train crash in 40 years. The accident occurred just days before the first major planned deregulation of Spain's rail network on July 31.

The high-speed train carrying 218 passengers derailed at Angrois, on the outskirts of Santiago de Compostela, the regional capital of Galicia in northwest Spain, on its way from Madrid to the coastal city of Ferrol. All 13 carriages came off the tracks as the train rounded a sharp double bend, four carriages turned over, one split in half and another caught fire. Unofficial reports say the train was travelling at 190 kilometres per hour (120 mph) on a bend restricted to 80 km/h (50 mph).

Passenger Ricardo Montesco told Cadena Ser radio station, "It was going so quickly... It seems that on a curve the train started to twist, and the wagons piled up one on top of the other."

"A lot of people were squashed on the bottom. We tried to squeeze out of the bottom of the wagons to get out and we realised the train was burning... I was in the second wagon and there was fire ... I saw corpses," Montesco added.

Both the train operator Renfe, and Adif, which manages the track and stations, have started an investigation into the cause of the derailment but have declined to make a statement until the black boxes of the train have been examined. However, it is clear the Angrois bend was always a potentially dangerous hazard on a route where trains alternate between the Spanish High Speed (Alta Velocidad Española, AVE) lines and conventional track.

On the journey from Madrid to Ferrol, a train travels on approximately 150 kilometres on AVE track from Madrid to Valladolid and then 300 kilometres on conventional track with slower trains to Ourense. It returns to AVE for the next 50 kilometres until it reaches the first bend at Angrois, where it reverts to

conventional track again.

The signalling on AVE track is of the newer European Train Control System (ETCS), which was introduced on high-speed lines, to comply with European Union (EU) requirements in the 1990s. Most of the navigation is done by on-board computers receiving electronic signals along the route and automatically stopping the train instead of relying on the driver to spot trackside signals which, at high speed, can be almost impossible to see. At Angrois the older ASFA signalling system comes into operation again, which warns but does not stop the train.

Juan Jesús García Fraile, the general secretary of the Semaf train drivers trade union, told state broadcaster RNE, that the accident "could have been prevented" if an ETCS system had been in operation. Another union official said, "It's an old track, standard gauge, which is not prepared for a train travelling at high speed, especially on such a sharp curve. The driver is forced to stop suddenly."

Until the 1990s, Spain's railway system was the most antiquated in Western Europe, running on its own unique broad gauge tracks. Over the past two decades, rapid development has meant Spain having a third of all the high-speed rail routes in Europe and becoming second in the world behind China.

The development of the rail network was given the highest priority by successive right-wing Popular Party (PP) and Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) governments. They saw it as a symbol of Spain's transition from dictatorship to the modern world and a way to counter the rising nationalist tensions in the regions. The expertise gained has also enabled Spanish companies to win major contracts abroad, including the construction of a high-speed train link in Saudi Arabia and the possibility of further projects in Russia and Brazil.

Much of the money for the network in Spain came from subsidies from the EU, which Spain joined in

1986. However, the EU, as a capitalist bloc seeking to enrich its own ruling elite and compete with its rivals, saw the subsidies as a way to build up state assets in order to pave the way for deregulation and privatisation.

In 2005 Adif was split off from Renfe as the new track authority, emulating the process in the UK that led to the privatisation of British Rail. The moves towards privatisation were accelerated with the 2008 global economic crisis, pushing millions into unemployment and forcing Spain into requesting an international bailout. In order to meet the tough conditions attached to the EU-agreed deficit reduction targets, Spain has imposed one austerity package after another.

In 2009, the PSOE government under José Luis Zapatero passed a Railway Sector Act enabling the entry of private capital into the rail industry. The following year, PSOE transport minister Isaías Táboas Suárez insisted that government's funding of all of Spain's rail projects was no longer possible. "We have made huge investments but these cannot be repeated in the coming years," he said.

Táboas revealed that there would be greater use of Public Private Partnerships, even though he admitted they were more risky because private owners would demand greater profits.

In May 2010, rail workers went on strike in opposition to changes to working conditions. This was followed a few days later by a strike of around 2 million public sector workers, protesting the imposition by the PSOE government of an initial €15 billion austerity package involving pay cuts, pay freezes and the threat of new labour laws.

What was begun by Zapatero was continued under the PP government of Mariano Rajoy elected in December 2011.

In July 2012, the PP government ordered Renfe to cut €200 million from its budget and drew up plans for the "total deregulation of railway transport," including the privatisation of Renfe by July 2013. Renfe was to be split into four limited companies: passenger services, freight services, maintenance and rolling stock in preparation for their sale.

Railway unions threatened united action to block the proposals but on June 27, 2013, the Renfe board of directors, with the vote of the representatives of the rail

unions SEMAF, CCOO and UGT, approved the division.

This year cuts are expected to result in rail investment falling by a quarter, from €5.1 billion last year, to €3.8 billion. Although the high-speed network is still relatively protected, the "Galician gap" between Olmedo and Ourense will still not be completed before 2020. The brunt of the cuts will fall on Renfe's regional and suburban services, which have been told to slash their operating deficit by 43 percent. Renfe has debts of €5 billion and Adif, rated as junk by Moody's credit rating agency, has debts of more than €11 billion.

The cuts and moves towards deregulation and privatisation have caused chaos, particularly in Galicia. An indication of their effects can be gained from the web site www.raillynews.com, which reported at the beginning of June that "it was almost impossible to know exactly what trains were operating around the northwestern region of Galicia. National rail operator Renfe, and Adif, the company that manages the lines, attributed the delay in informing rail users to last-minute political decisions to make changes to the announced cuts. So far the ministry has remained silent on the matter."

There were plans to withdraw 72 out of 306 weekly services, but Renfe "was this week unable to give details of which services were currently running in the region."



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