

Spanish train companies implicated in rail crash that killed 79

Carlos Hernández
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It is now three months since the derailment of the high-speed Alvia train at Angrois, on the Orense-Santiago de Compostelo stretch in Galicia, northwestern Spain. 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. The accident, which left 79 of its 218 passengers dead and 140 injured, was the most deadly in recent European history.

From the moment of the derailment, the media, the train operator Renfe, the railway infrastructure company Adif and members of the government, including Interior Minister Jorge Fernández Díaz, Galician regional government president Alberto Núñez Feijóo, and Infrastructure Minister Ana Pastor, attributed sole responsibility to the driver, Francisco José Garzón Amo. The judge responsible for the case, Luis Aláez, has charged Garzón with “79 counts of homicide and numerous offences of bodily harm committed through professional recklessness” for negotiating the bend at more than double the 80 kilometres per hour.

Since then, however, Aláez has issued a series of court orders charging those responsible, politically or technically, for safety failures in the design, construction and opening of the stretch of railway where the accident occurred.

The orders point to a possible crime of “imprudence” for the “omission of cautionary elements” in the railway’s safety systems. The targets of the orders are those who placed the responsibility for safety in the hands of one person, the driver. A hypothetical error or distraction of the driver was “predictable”, but despite this and the dangerous bend in the line, there was no “automatic braking safety system,” or “adequate” signposting, one of the orders states.

In these documents, the judge lists some of the shortcomings in the railway’s security. He points to the lack of the European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS) for automatic braking and speed reduction. In use since 2004 on some high-speed trains in Spain, the ERTMS was applied to Alvia trains in 2010 but subsequently withdrawn due to “technical difficulties”.

The lack of this security system, Aláez argued, should have prompted those responsible for security to install warning signals, which on the Orense-Santiago stretch are “nonexistent”. According to the judge, those responsible include people in the security management, but also those in the administration charged with “supervision and control” of their subordinates in security.

In his next order, the judge charged 22 current and former Adif employees, including its last three presidents. They are accused of “at least a serious lack of diligence in preventive and corrective intervention” in letting trains take the Angrois curve without sufficient safety measures to avoid human error.

Adif is claiming that the administration is not responsible for questions concerning security and sought to shift the blame on to the director of security. Neither the director nor the five technicians responsible for security management accept responsibility for the signposting along the Orense-Santiago stretch.

Within days of the accident, the absent signalling was installed on the stretch leading up to the deadly bend. Likewise, safety measures were revised and an automatic braking system was installed, proving that such safety precautions were technically feasible and easy to implement.

The charges against those responsible for the design and construction of the line recall the views expressed by the driver himself in a call made to emergency

services just minutes after the derailment. “I already told the security guy that that bend was dangerous and that one day it would swallow us,” Garzón said, before he knew of any fatalities. “We’re human and this can happen. This can’t be real”, he said.

In recent months, the driver has also revealed more details about the accident, appearing before the judge at his own request. He told the court that he had been talking to the train’s conductor on his company’s cell phone just before it derailed. Garzón stated that he only picked up because he saw that it was his superior calling and thought that there might have been an emergency.

The call was in fact about the possibility of entering Pontedeume, a town further down the line, by a different track than planned. The conversation lasted about two minutes with the train travelling at 190 kilometres per hour. As soon as he hung up, Garzón saw the curve at Angrois, where the speed limit is 80 kilometres per hour. This version of the events is confirmed by information retrieved from the black box.

“When I realised, I took both the brakes in my hands,” Garzón said. Ten seconds later, the train came off the track.



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