

Fatal rail crash in Bavaria

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Ten people were killed early Tuesday morning in a head-on collision between two trains near Bad Aibling in Upper Bavaria, Germany. Both train drivers and two conductors were among the dead. According to rescue workers, 90 more were injured, 55 of them seriously. Seventeen people remained in critical condition as of Tuesday evening.

Shortly before 7 a.m., the two commuter trains collided on the track between Holzkirchen and Rosenheim. According to the schedule, the trains were not authorized to travel on the single-track line at the same time.

One of the trains was scheduled to wait at one of two passing points, either in Kolbermoor or Bad Aibling. Instead, they sped toward each other at approximately 100 kilometres per hour. Their paths crossed on a wooded hillside near the Mangfall canal, preventing the drivers from seeing what was up ahead. As a result, the trains collided at full speed.

The entire length of a railcar was ripped open. Both of the drivers' compartments were completely destroyed and several cars derailed.

Several hundred rescue workers, firefighters, Red Cross workers, doctors, technical relief workers and others worked intensely for five hours to free the victims from the wreckage. The crash site is inaccessible to vehicles. The injured had to be ferried across the canal in water rescue service canoes and lifted by cable winches into helicopters, which flew them to area clinics. Aid workers from Austria were also on hand, and hospitals in Munich and Tirol made beds available. The population of nearby Munich was called upon to donate blood.

This was the worst railway accident in Bavaria in a long time. The number of victims might have been higher still had school been in session and the annual Carnival not been taking place in Bavaria. On a normal working day, thousands of commuters are riding local

trains in the direction of Munich at the hour the crash took place.

Since 2013, the Bayrischen Oberlandbahn (Bavarian Overland Railway—BOB) has operated the Meridian trains, belonging to the French transport company Transdev, on the line where the crash occurred. Five thousand people in Germany work for Transdev, which has 83,000 employees in 20 countries. Its revenues are reportedly €6.6 billion worldwide and €850 million in Germany.

The German railway company Deutsche Bahn supervised the rail lines. In a statement, Deutsche Bahn asserted that its safety systems normally prevent two trains from being on the same single-line track at the same time. Every German line has built-in sensors, part of the PZB 90 intermittent train control system. The system uses magnets on the track bed and train cars that can determine whether a train is going too fast or has ignored a signal to stop. In emergencies, the system can trigger the train's brakes. There is, however, an override button that allows the train driver to turn off the system.

It remains unclear why neither of the trains involved in the crash were automatically forced to stop in one of the two passing points to await the arrival of the other. The trip recorders from three black boxes must be analysed before it can be determined whether a technical failure occurred, whether there was an error in the signaling system or whether the crash was due to error on the part of one of the train drivers.

Karl Peter Naumann, former chairman of the passengers' association "Pro Bahn," said on the ARD's news program *Tagesschau* on Tuesday that there were very secure systems to prevent train accidents. He doubted, however, whether the necessary technology was in place everywhere. High-tech security systems have up to now been installed in approximately 10,000 of the almost 40,000 kilometres

of train lines in Germany. “Security costs money,” said Naumann. “Politicians must be ready to invest billions... That has not always been the case.”

Naumann also pointed out that there was a railway construction site in the area. “Unclear conditions always prevail then,” he said.

What is certain is that major route changes and replacement bus services were announced on the Internet for this precise train line for the end of February. Whether this has something to do with the accident remains unclear.

Outdated train and rail technology, poor maintenance and material defects have led to several tragic accidents in recent years. The worst rail catastrophe in Germany was the 1998 accident in Eschede in Lower Saxony. An ICE-Express train derailed, killing 101 people.

In February 2000, an accident in Brühl killed eight people and seriously injured 50. Five years ago, two trains collided on a single-line track in Oschersleben in Saxony-Anhalt. This accident, in which 10 people were killed, was very similar to Tuesday’s catastrophe in Upper Bavaria.

In Belgium, rail workers went out on strike in 2010 after a catastrophe in which two transport trains careened into one another in Brussels. Eighteen people were killed and almost 200 injured.

The main cause of these devastating accidents is the drive for profit by banks and corporations, which demand the privatization and deregulation of public rail companies. For train drivers and conductors, this has already led to positions being cut in half and wages being slashed. They face compulsory overtime and increasingly stressful working conditions.

In the last two years, train drivers in Germany have carried out seven strikes lasting several weeks each to fight against sinking incomes, increasing work loads and job cuts. In July 2015, the German Train Drivers’ Union (GDL) accepted a strike ban.

The union capitulated before a joint offensive by rail management, the federal government, the business trade associations, the media and the German Confederation of Labour (DGB). All of these institutions were united in sacrificing the health of workers and the safety of travelers on the altar of corporate profit. A few weeks later, Deutsche Bahn Chairman Rüdiger Grube announced a new wave of job cuts. Grube told *Die Welt*: “Naturally this concerns

economic stability and securing the future sustainability of corporations. Jobs will be lost in the course of restructuring.”



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