

Barcelona train crash injures 56 during nationwide rail strike

Paul Mitchell
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Friday morning at 7:15 a.m. a suburban train travelling from Tarragona in Catalonia ploughed into the buffers at the Estación de Francia (France Station) in the regional capital, Barcelona. Fifty-six people were injured and 21 hospitalised, with one left in a critical condition.

The Barcelona-based *La Vanguardia* reported that many of the passengers had been standing up, ready to get off, when the crash occurred.

Spain's minister of public works, Íñigo de la Serna, claimed that the train had passed all its inspections, the last of which was on July 18, and that the driver had seven years' experience. Catalan regional minister of the territory and sustainability, Josep Rull, said that the train had already slowed down and that "If it had entered at full speed we would have had an accident of unforeseeable consequences."

Officials in the Metropolitan Transport Safety Area, attached to the Transport Division of the Mossos d'Esquadra (regional police), have already begun an investigation, as has the Commission for Investigation of Railway Accidents, which is part of the Ministry of Public Works. The High Court of Justice of Catalonia (TSJC) announced legal proceedings had begun.

The crash happened during a one-day national strike of rail workers opposed to attacks on jobs and wages. The General Confederation of Labour (CGT) made clear that it only called the action once the union had "exhausted all the channels of negotiation, the deadlines set by this organization and the patience derived from the goodwill to negotiate."

The CGT warned that the "lack of response" by Renfe, the state-run train operator, and Adif, responsible for tracks and stations, generates "a lot of uncertainty within the railway collectives given the lack of future of the companies themselves, putting in

question the continuity of the railroad as a public service."

The CGT's answer to the crisis is limited to requesting "an improvement in the quality of jobs," "slowing down the continuous outsourcing of workloads" and "recovering lost purchasing power in recent years."

That rail workers are having to strike for these demands is an indictment of the CGT and the other rail unions. The fact that rail companies, with the agreement of the union, are able to legally enforce minimum services during a strike—50 percent during peak hours (33 percent in Catalonia) and 75 percent (66 percent in Catalonia) in off-peak—only causes chaos and confusion and increases the likelihood of accidents.

The crash occurred on the regional rail system Rodalies de Catalunya (Catalonia Commuter Rail), which, unlike any other system in Spain, has been administered by the regional government since 2010 rather than the Spanish government. The network consists of 17 lines, mainly around Barcelona, serving a total of 203 regional stations.

Rodalies de Catalunya, especially in Barcelona, has the reputation of being one of the worst rail operators in Spain in terms of safety. There is an ongoing dispute between the Catalan government and the Popular Party government in Madrid over who is responsible. The Catalan government continues to blame Adif, which still maintains track and stations in the region. Britain's *Daily Telegraph* reported of Estación de Francia, "There may be questions over the state of the station itself; the listed building has been eyed for closure since 1969 and the previous mayor had planned to shutter it in 2015."

A report in October 2013 revealed there had been nine accidents, injuring 80 people, in the previous three

years. These included one in February 2012, when a train also ran into the buffers at the Mataró station, north of Barcelona, injuring 11 people.

Workers in the Barcelona Metro (TMB) have also been involved in a long-running dispute over pay and conditions. On Monday, they took their 12th day of strike action in the past three months. Yet again, under the auspices of the CGT, this was kept separate from the national rail strike.

Last year, the *World Socialist Web Site* reported how the CGT capitulated to the city's mayor, Ada Colau, a founder of En Comú, a coalition including Podemos, Initiative for Catalonia Greens (ICV), United and Alternative Left (EUiA) and various community movements, over a strike in opposition to a four-year wage freeze and for an end to temporary contracts.

The Catalan government's Department of Work, Social Affairs and Families presented on Monday a mediation proposal "worked on intensely during the last two weeks with the strike committee" that supposedly "improves" the meagre four-year deal offered by TMB last year, which was rejected by the Metro workers. The committee, made up of union bureaucrats, now has the task of selling the stitch-up to the workers' assemblies.

The CGT declared, "We will hold a general assembly of workers to assess the proposal worked out between the labour department and the Strike Committee."

The secretary general of the Communist Party-led CCOO union in Catalonia, Javier Pacheco, tweeted favourably, "The conflict has to come to an end with workers' participation."

Not to be forgotten is the role of the president of TMB—Mercedes Vidal, a leading member of the EUiA and councillor for the Barcelona district of Horta-Guinardó.

This week, *Info Horta-Guinardó*, a web site that "gives voice to the neighbourhood and popular movements" of the Horta-Guinardó district, released a series of mobile phone text messages between Vidal and other leading members of the EUiA, "mocking" the TMB workers, in the web site's words. The officials complain that an "aristocracy of workers" at the Metro have been holding strikes "lasting for many years." They warn of the "danger of putting on the table the salaries of the top managers of TMB" because it would make for "comparison with the lower workers,

thus recognizing the privileges of some and the precariousness of others."

The EUiA leaders then discuss how they needed to organise together to counteract "the presence of the underground workers" and "to deal with the pansyndicalism that is a terrible scourge for the public." This is the Spanish "left."



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