

Antiquated signalling system leads to another deadly train crash in Egypt

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A horrific train collision just south of Alexandria, Egypt's second city, on the Mediterranean coast, left at least 41 people dead and 179 injured on Friday.

The crash was no "accident" but the product of the truly atrocious state of the transport infrastructure, the dilapidated and antiquated signalling system and the failure to enforce even the most basic railway safety standards in Egypt, the most populous country in the Middle East, which has seen numerous deadly accidents in recent years.

In November 2013, a collision between a train and a bus killed 27 people in Badrashin in Giza, near Cairo. That came just months after a train carrying soldiers was derailed, killing 17 of the conscripts, and another collision between a train and school bus on a rail crossing in the town of Manfalut in Upper Egypt in 2012 that killed 51 people, most of whom were children.

While that accident was blamed on a signal operator, both the transport minister and the head of the railway authority were forced to resign. The government set up an investigation into the accident to pacify the anguished parents, but did absolutely nothing to improve the railway system. In 2002, in Egypt's worst rail disaster, a fire swept through a passenger train killing around 360 people.

On Friday afternoon, the train travelling from Cairo to Alexandria crashed into the back of a stationary train near Khorshid station that was travelling from Port Said in the east to Alexandria, causing the two trains to mount into the air, "forming a pyramid," according to eye-witnesses.

The Port Said train driver said he had halted because the railway signal, of a very old design, was on stop and notified the other driver. He repudiated suggestions that the train had malfunctioned. The Cairo train driver, who crashed into the Port Said train, said he had received no notification that the other train had stopped and could not stop in time.

On Saturday, Transport Minister Hesham Arafat implicitly supported the Cairo train driver, saying that the crash was caused by the railway's manual-operation system and poorly developed infrastructure. In the now time-honoured tradition, he ordered an investigation into the crash, pledging to "hold accountable" whoever was responsible.

He clearly did not mean top government officials who for years have starved the railways of cash and allowed them to fall into decay. On Sunday, an administrative prosecutor suspended eight railway officials, while prosecutors in Alexandria ordered the 15-day detention of the main scapegoats, the drivers of the two trains, along with their two aides. The driver of the Cairo-Alexandria train had already surrendered himself to the police.

The police released other railway staff after questioning, including the chairman of the Railway Authority, Medhat Shousha, who later resigned. The transport minister announced his replacement the following day amid suggestions that others would also be sacked.

Social Solidarity Minister Ghada Wali announced that the ministry would give a derisory compensation of 50,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$2,800) apiece to the families of those killed, while compensation for the injured would be determined on a case-by-case basis.

The train crash took place amid mounting political, economic and social strife, demonstrating the crisis-ridden character of the military regime headed by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

In the past several weeks, Sisi has appointed judges to head the State Council, the Supreme Judicial Council, the State Lawsuit Authority and the Administrative Prosecution Authority, overriding the wishes of the judiciary, many of whom oppose the new presidential powers that undermine the independence of the judiciary and the separation of powers. His opponents believe that the appointments will render the judiciary subordinate to

the country's vast security apparatus, thereby creating a one-man dictatorship.

For the last four years, Egyptian forces have been fighting an ISIS affiliate in the Sinai peninsula, leading to more than 6,000 deaths, many more than the number of Islamist militants in the area, who are believed to number around 1,000. Media access to the region is restricted. Journalists who deviate from official accounts about Sinai and elsewhere, with reports of torture, forced disappearances and killings at the hands of the Egyptian army, have been criminalised under anti-terror laws.

Last month, pictures of an Egyptian man found two days after he was arrested, showing what appeared to be evidence of torture, emerged on social media. It was the second such incident in a week.

Tens of thousands of textile workers have been on strike and organised sit-ins for more than a week in pursuit of higher wages and better working conditions, in defiance of General Sisi's brutal dictatorship, which has the full backing of the imperialist powers.

The strikers include 16,000 workers at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company (MSWC), Egypt's largest state-owned textile mill, located in the Nile Delta city of Mahalla al-Kubra, not far from Alexandria. The strike is costing the company over 5 million Egyptian pounds (US\$280,000) a day.

Mahalla al-Kubra has long functioned as the epicentre of working-class struggle in Egypt, with the textile workers mounting massive strikes against the regime of former dictator Hosni Mubarak in 2006 and 2008. They played a key role in the mass revolutionary struggles in 2011 that brought down Mubarak. In December 2012, amid rising working-class opposition to Islamist President Mohamed Mursi, workers and students in Mahalla declared themselves "autonomous" from what they called Mursi's "Muslim Brotherhood State."

The textile workers have refused to accept management's deal with the unions for a 10 percent basic salary rise, saying they would only end the strike if they won demands for an increased share of the company's profits, an increased food allowance, and other delayed bonuses and changes in promotion policy, as promised by el-Sisi and parliament in June. Public business minister Ashraf el-Sharkawy had announced that the workers would not receive the increase because they had received an end-of-year profit share instead. The textile workers rejected this, saying they would stay on strike until they were paid what they are owed.

The Egyptian authorities deployed troops to the

entrances and exits of Mahalla, along with secret agents, in preparation for any mass marches or protests.

So far, the unions have managed to stop the workers, who had threatened to escalate their action with demonstrations, alongside thousands of their families, outside the factory until their demands were met, from taking further action. Dozens protested outside the company's headquarters in Talaat Harb Square in downtown Cairo until the company's security forces "persuaded" them to leave.

Social tensions are escalating as Egypt suffers its deepest economic crisis in more than a decade: inflation has reached 33 percent, an increase of 8 percentage points since the beginning of 2017.

Prices for essential food items, medicine, transit and housing have soared after the Egyptian pound lost half its value after being floated by the government last November. The pressure on working class and poor Egyptians has been further exacerbated by cuts to fuel subsidies that have led to a 50 percent increase in fuel prices, and the implementation of a new value-added tax.

The Egyptian government began enforcing this latest raft of austerity measures in order to secure the release of US\$12 billion in loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), part of an agreement signed in November. The results have been devastating, with families struggling to make ends meet, and angry protests last March demanding bread subsidies.

According to official figures that are but a pale reflection of the reality, more than 27 percent of the population already live below the poverty line, with commentators noting that is set to rise unless the economic conditions improve. Unemployment stands at 27 percent for young workers aged 18 to 29, who make up around 24 percent of Egypt's nearly 90 million population. Most of the unemployed are highly educated, with around 38 percent holding graduate and postgraduate degrees and 30 percent holding vocational high school diplomas.



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