

Stonehaven rail disaster due to UK's neglected railway earthworks

Steve James
19 August 2020

The horrifying train wreck near Stonehaven, Scotland, last week, was the result of the dilapidated condition of Britain's rail infrastructure.

Starved for decades of essential maintenance funding, the railways have been transformed by successive governments into state-subsidised cash cows for private corporations.

Three people—two train crew and a passenger—were killed, and six other passengers injured on the 06.38 service from Aberdeen to Glasgow, on August 12. The victims were driver Brett McCullough, conductor Donald Dinnie and passenger Chris Stuchbury, a tugboat captain. One of the injured remains in hospital.

The train was nearly empty, with only nine passengers. Had the service been anywhere near full capacity, fatalities and injuries would have been much higher.

The high-speed train, consisting of two diesel power units and four passenger coaches, left Aberdeen on time amid atrocious weather conditions of thunderstorms and torrential rainfall. Parts of the UK had just experienced one month's rain over a few hours. Stonehaven saw 65mm of rain in two hours. Schools, reopening in Scotland for the first time since the national lockdown, and transport were disrupted across the region.

Why the train departed is unclear. Two previous southbound trains from Aberdeen had been cancelled, as were subsequent services. Driver McCullough's sister Salina commented on social media that she held train operator ScotRail responsible. ScotRail is owned by transport conglomerate Abellio.

Addressing ScotRail, she wrote, "During one of the worst storms to hit Scotland, you sent my brother out to drive a beast of a train. ... I wish Brett had refused, but that wasn't in his nature, he would never let anyone down."

The train left Stonehaven, 15 minutes by rail from Aberdeen, on time, only to receive a radio message a few

miles out of Stonehaven, warning that another train driver had seen a landslip further down the line.

The train was instructed to return to Aberdeen and reversed on the southbound line to a set of points. Here the train was held for a couple of hours while an engineer drove to the site to switch the manually operated points. The train then switched to the northbound line and set off back towards Stonehaven.

In the intervening period, another landslip appears to have blocked the northbound line, at a particularly deep gully at Carmont, just south of Stonehaven, which the diverted train hit at a speed of around 50 mph.

According to Tony Miles of *Modern Railway* magazine, the speed limit on that section of railway was 65 mph. Miles told the *Times*, "There would be no reason then, even under caution, unless it had been explicitly agreed with the Network Rail controllers, for the train not to proceed normally at line speed."

He continued, "The sad fact is that because of the terrain, and on a bend, if the train encountered a landslip there would be little time, even with the application of the emergency brake, to avoid a collision."

The train jumped the track, continued for 100 metres, then hit the parapet of a bridge. The front power unit and a passenger coach tumbled down an embankment where the engine caught fire. Two other coaches jack-knifed, one ending up upside down on top of another. Only the rear coach and power unit remained upright.

An off-duty rail worker, Nicola Whyte, who was injured in the crash, walked three miles to raise the alarm. Emergency services had difficulty reaching the scene. Four fire fighters suffered minor injuries in the rescue operation.

That such a clearly avoidable tragedy should occur on the main line south from Aberdeen, a city with a conurbation of over 300,000 people, points to a crisis in rail infrastructure, particularly earthworks, maintenance

across Britain.

State controlled Network Rail (NR), which owns the rail network and leases lines to private train operating companies, reported its intention to carry out emergency inspections of dozens of “higher risk trackside slopes” with similar characteristics to the Aberdeenshire crash site. Some inspections would be carried out from helicopters.

NR CEO, Andrew Haines, blamed climate change. Railways in Britain, said Haines, were “designed for a temperate climate, but it’s challenged when we get extremes such as storms and floods.” NR intended to mobilise its “extreme weather action teams,” open a dialogue with meteorologists, and review plans to monitor high risk sites.

Speaking to the BBC, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the crash was shocking because “these accidents on the railways are thankfully so rare.” But it is only down to chance and the many interventions of railway staff, including conductors—who the train companies and government want to remove from trains—that many more such incidents have not taken place.

Other landslips occurred the same day, including in Fife, Scotland. The Shrewsbury to Llandrindod Wells “Heart of Wales” line suffered extensive damage. Many services across the UK were disrupted by flooding.

Roads were also affected. A major landslide on the A83 “Rest and be Thankful” road in Argyll and Bute, occurred the previous week. Some 6,000 tonnes of rocks and mud blocked the busy rural route, necessitating a 58-mile diversion. The A83 has been blocked by landslips repeatedly over the last decades.

Three investigations into the Stonehaven incident have been launched. The first is a joint investigation by the Office of Rail and Road (ORR), Police Scotland and the British Transport Police. This is being directed by the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. A second independent investigation is being conducted by the Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB). The UK government under Conservative Transport Secretary Grant Shapps has ordered Network Rail to carry out an investigation, due to report by September, into “wider issues” that may have led to the crash.

The British and Scottish authorities, ScotRail and NR, will all be seeking to avoid responsibility for a catastrophe that has been long in the making.

NR’s own June 2018 Earthworks Technical Strategy document makes clear that the company, and therefore both the government and the devolved administrations,

have long been aware of the network’s vulnerability.

NR maintains 190,000 “earthwork assets” near about 19,000 km of track. Many were constructed in the 19th century “on an unprecedented scale”. This has resulted in a “legacy of over-steep embankments and cuttings across the network” which, when compared with assets controlled by modern design codes are “inherently disadvantaged”. “The asset count, age, degradation and current rate of strengthening provide a unique management challenge on a macro scale.”

NR’s response to these challenges, arising from Britain’s historic role as one of the first industrial powers in the world, is based on reducing costs, “risk management” and managing public perceptions. The NR document states that “our organisation’s approach to risk management is determined by risk appetite and tolerance.”

It complains that “Perceptions of the asset base and expectations of its ability to perform will often need careful management, particularly at times of heightened potential for failure during prolonged wet weather.”

NR note that the winters of 2013/14 and 2015/16 showed the “susceptibility of the asset base to failure.”

Only earthworks deemed the most dangerous will be dealt with quickly while the organisation aspires to renew or refurbish a mere “0.5% and 1.0% of the asset base” every five years. At that rate it will take between 500 and 1,000 years to refurbish them all. Neither of the earthworks that collapsed near Stonehaven appear to even have had monitoring devices—one of the essential maintenance tools NR claims it will eventually roll out—installed.

All such plans are being disastrously undermined by Network Rail’s cost-cutting. It carried out a reduction of its maintenance staff by 12 percent between 2009/10 and 2013/14, down by 2,169 to 15,813. Then it set a target of 2019 of further cost-cutting of 20 percent.

As with the Grenfell Tower disaster and the coronavirus pandemic, the Stonehaven rail crash exposes the systemic elevation of profits above the safety of the population. Every area of life is being subordinated to the accumulation of wealth by a super-rich elite and the corporations they run.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact