

British train crash highlights safety threat posed by privatisation and destaffing

Simon Whelan

11 November 2021

Investigators believe “low adhesion” between the railhead and train wheels was the most likely cause of the crash between two trains in Salisbury on October 31.

The trains collided on the approach to a tunnel near Salisbury station at approximately 18:45 GMT. A South Western Railway (SWR) train running from London to Honiton, Devon, struck the side of a Great Western Railway (GWR) service from Southampton to Cardiff, as they both entered the Fisherton Tunnel.

The driver of the SWR train, 75-year-old Robin Tandy, with 50 years train driving experience, suffered injuries believed to be “life-changing” and had to be cut from his cab by emergency service workers. There is no maximum train driver age limit in the UK provided they continue to pass the necessary medical.

Of the 92 passengers on board the two trains, 14 people required hospital treatment for minor injuries. Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue declared the crash a “major incident”, with 50 firefighters attending the scene and coastguard helicopters also assisting rescue efforts.

During the immediate aftermath of the crash, veteran train guard Martin Miller led rail passengers to safety. After the collision Miller immediately contacted the SWR control centre. The guard subsequently went through all the carriages assisting and reassuring passengers, including a mother and her baby, they would be able to leave the train once the tracks were made safe.

British Transport Police (BTP) said that the two trains were travelling in the same direction on different tracks but collided at a Y-shaped junction approaching the tunnel, with one hitting the side of the other causing it to derail. A carriage was initially thought to have derailed after hitting an object, with the second train then crashing into it, but BTP told a press conference “there was nothing to suggest” the train had struck an object.

Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB) inspectors say their initial investigation findings suggest “Low

adhesion between the wheels and the track” as the reason why the SWR service failed to stop at the junction where the two lines merged and crashed into the side of the GWR train.

The RAIB’s preliminary analysis showed the driver initially applied the service brakes to slow the train, but approximately 12 seconds after the driver made an emergency brake demand. Tandy, the SWR driver, and a driver on the rail network since the 1970s, did apply the brakes, investigators confirmed.

Tandy is a “deeply-respected colleague” with an ‘excellent professional track record’ who “stayed at the controls throughout,” said the SWR. He acted in an “impeccable way in a valiant attempt to keep passengers safe”.

Tandy’s actions undoubtedly saved many lives. Speaking to the *Daily Mail*, Kevin Regan, a friend and colleague said, “He’s probably the most experienced driver on the network if not the country. How no passengers were killed or more seriously injured is beyond me.

“He must have only had about six seconds to react and fling the brakes into emergency. The train was probably doing about 45-50mph as it was due to stop at Salisbury station nearby. Bear in mind the tracks were wet as well due to the heavy rainfall on Sunday.

“His experience and knowledge—having been a driver for so long—must have been a factor. He’s the hero of the hour, that’s for sure, and at a personal cost to himself because he’s suffered serious injuries. Quite how bad, we don’t yet know. The driver’s side of his cab looks completely mangled from the photographs I’ve seen, so he must have flung himself onto the floor onto the other side just in the nick of time.”

The failure of the initial brake applied by the driver was followed by a second emergency brake demand made by the train protection and warning system. The RAIB

investigation intends to study the level of wheel to rail adhesion on the approach to tunnel junction and to also consider how well Network Rail (NR) managed the risk of potential insufficient wheel track adhesion. Network Rail employs 42,000 staff and ensures track safety and maintenance and signalling systems across the network.

Andrew Hall, RAIB's deputy chief inspector, stated, "This evidence suggests that the most likely cause of this was wheel-slide, almost certainly a result of low adhesion between the wheels and the track. We are continuing to pursue this as a line of investigation amongst others."

Hall said the RAIB had worked with the BTP to examine the track and train and were continuing to analyse evidence from the trains' data recorders, signalling systems and CCTV. More comprehensive initial findings would be published at a later date.

Speaking to the *Guardian*, railway engineer and writer Gareth Dennis said the most likely cause of the "low adhesion" was tree leaves. "The South Western train was shown red to wait. It looks like as he applied the brakes there was a low adhesion event—the wheels were sliding. This is a serious problem we have had on our railways for a long time." The approach to the tunnel is tree-lined, and the writer pointed out, "It is best not to have trees overhanging."

It is only a matter of chance and the many interventions of railway staff, including guards who perform a safety critical role, that many more such incidents, including ones leading to fatalities, have been largely avoided in recent years on Britain's railways.

Deciduous trees create "leaves on the line" during autumn and fleets of Railhead Treatment Trains are meant to run across the network using high pressure water jets to clean railheads. But starved for decades of essential maintenance funding, the railways have been transformed by successive governments into state-subsidised cash cows for private corporations to milk massive profits while providing unsafe, infrequent, overcrowded and expensive train services.

In 2020 at Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire, a landslide caused a ScotRail service to come off the tracks, killing three people onboard. The recent crash in Salisbury marks the first collision between moving trains since the crash at Ladbroke Grove, London in 1999.

Deaths of rail workers rose from zero in 2016 to five in 2021. Accident inspectors criticised NR for long-term safety failings that led to the deaths of two track workers in South Wales in 2019. Until the 2020 pandemic lockdown, there has been worrying rise in the number of

SPADs, i.e., signals passed at danger. There have been a succession of derailments, and trains hitting the buffers, including in London and Liverpool.

Network Rail 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.

Central to the bolstering of profits and cuts to safety is the ongoing and reckless drive to destaff trains, with the main target the removal of thousands of guards, who like Martin Miller in the Salisbury crash, perform daily a critical safety role of behalf of the public and other rail staff.

As well as lauding driver Tandy, the *Daily Mail* described Miller as "a hero train guard". Yet it and other right-wing publications have spent the best part of the last decade demonising workers such as Miller and cheering on Britain's rail company profiteers as they have put in place forms of Driver Only Operation (DOO) trains aimed at the removal of guards from trains.

Demanding in parliament that David Cameron's Conservative government crackdown on strikes against the introduction of DOO at Southern rail in 2016, Horsham Conservative MP Jeremy Quin ridiculed the role of the guard saying the dispute was, "Not over jobs, not over wages, but over who gets to press a button."

In the face of mass opposition to DOO from rail workers, the government and rail companies have been able to push through forms of DOO throughout the rail network, with the collaboration of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union and the ASLEF train drivers' union. More lives will be needlessly endangered and lost in future incidents on the railways as a result of thousands of guards losing their jobs and further cuts in safety standards and maintenance.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact