

Greece's worst train disaster kills at least 40

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The worst train disaster in Greek history has claimed the lives of at least 40 people with dozens of people still unaccounted for.

A passenger train, on route from Athens to Thessaloniki, crashed head-on into a freight train shortly before midnight Tuesday, outside the town of Tempe in central Greece. The passenger train was reportedly travelling at between 140 km/h (87 mph) and 160 km/h (99 mph), and the freight train at 100 km/h.

The passenger train was travelling north after leaving Larissa station, and the freight train travelling south from Thessaloniki to Larissa. After the collision, the mangled train fell into a field alongside the tracks.

Eight rail employees were among the dead, including the two drivers of the freight train and the two drivers of the passenger train, according to Greek Railroad Workers Union President Yannis Nitsas.

The fire brigade said Wednesday that 66 of the estimated 85 people injured in the collision had been taken to hospitals in Larissa. Six are in intensive care.

The rescue operation required 150 firefighters, using 17 vehicles and four cranes. Forty ambulances were mobilised. Around 200 people who suffered minor injuries or were unharmed were taken by bus to Thessaloniki.

Many of the around 350 passengers onboard were students returning home to Thessaloniki—Greece's second city has a large university population—after holidays during Greek Orthodox lent. *Greek Reporter* said, "The head of the emergency unit in Larissa hospital, Apostolos Komnos, said most of the dead were young people, in their 20's."

On collision the first four carriages of the passenger train were derailed. The first two carriages caught fire and were "almost completely destroyed," and "no longer exist," said the regional governor of the Thessaly region, Kostas Agorastos.

With first two carriages crushed, the third carriage—the restaurant car—vaulted over them and caught fire. There were reports of passengers being flung through train

windows. Some bodies were found as far as 40 metres from the railway line.

Survivor Angelos told AFP, "It felt like an earthquake... I saw scenes of horror in the first carriages. I'm still shaking."

Another survivor, Stergios Minenis, told Reuters, "We heard a big bang... We were turning over in the carriage until we fell on our sides and until the commotion stopped. Then there was panic. Cables, fire. The fire was immediate. As we were turning over we were being burned. Fire was right and left.

"For 10, 15 seconds it was chaos. Tumbling over, fires, cables hanging, broken windows, people screaming, people trapped."

"I've never seen anything like this in my entire life. It's tragic. Five hours later, we are finding bodies," a rescuer told AFP.

Chief coroner at Larissa's general hospital Roubini Leontari said Wednesday that 35 bodies are "right now are in the morgue while the transfer of other bodies is continuing. ... Some bodies were completely carbonized and are unrecognizable, for the most part it is young people."

The BBC reported, "The local fire department previously said the train car which caught fire hit temperatures of 1,300C (2,370F), while Larissa's mayor Apostolos Kalogiannis has indicated some of those who died would only be identifiable via DNA testing."

Greece's previous worst train crash occurred more than 50 years ago, in 1968, when two passenger trains crashed near Corinth, killing 34 passengers and injuring more than 120 others. When the final death toll is made, it could top the 80 people who died in a high-speed derailment in Spain in 2013, after a train overturned near Santiago de Compostela. The deaths already exceed by far the last comparable head-on collision on the European rail network in 2016, in Bad Aibling in Germany, which killed 12 people.

Greece's New Democracy (ND) conservative government has declared three days of national

mourning.

The political fallout was immediate, with Minister for Infrastructure and Transport Kostas Karamanlis resigning Wednesday afternoon. The heads of the privatised Hellenic Railways Organisation and its project branch ERGOSE also stood down.

It is not possible at this stage to identify the immediate causes of the tragedy, but it is known that both trains had been travelling towards each other on the same line for several kilometres. The 27.3 kilometre section of track in which the crash occurred was double-tracked and had automatic controls installed, but switching and signalling were still being controlled manually.

A 59-year-old station master was arrested in Larissa and charged with involuntary manslaughter by negligence, unintentionally causing mass bodily harm by negligence and dangerous interference with transport. The station master denies any wrongdoing and reportedly said the accident was down to possible technical failure. The station master took up his position 40 days ago, after a year's training.

Whatever the immediate causes, pinning responsibility on a single individual is a cover-up.

Many understand that the causes run much deeper in a society in which basic services and infrastructure have been massively degraded or destroyed over the past 15 years of scorched-earth austerity carried out by successive governments, including SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left). Thessaloniki's student associations have demanded a full investigation with no "cover-up." On Wednesday evening protesters gathered outside the headquarters of Hellenic Trains in Syggrou Avenue in the capital Athens. One banner read, "It was not a mistake, nor an unfortunate moment, their profits are placed above life." Another read, "Our dead, their profits."

The protest was brutally attacked by riot police using stun grenades and tear gas, with the demonstrators moving on towards parliament.

As the attack was taking place, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said in a televised address, "Everything shows that the drama was, sadly, mainly due to a tragic human error."

Commenting on the dire state of the rail network between Greece's two largest cities, train drivers' association president Kostas Genidounias told ERT, "Nothing works. Everything happens manually throughout the Athens-Thessaloniki network. Neither the indicators, nor the traffic lights, nor the electronic traffic control work." Nikos Tsikalakis, leader of the main rail

workers union, told Radio ENA that there are only 750 rail employees nationally, far below the required 2,000 plus.

The *Guardian* reported, "On measures including overall fatalities per kilometre, Greece's rail safety record has been the worst in the EU over the past decade, according to statistics from the EU railway agency—although this is easily skewed by its small network, about 2% of the UK's size. A high proportion of deaths have been track workers rather than passengers."

During half of that period, Greece's former state rail network and rolling stock company have been under private ownership, the result of an ongoing €55 billion mass sell-off of state assets demanded by the European Union, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and financial institutions during an austerity offensive carried out by successive governments led by ND, the social democratic PASOK and the pseudo-left SYRIZA (in office from 2015-19).

In June 2010, as savage austerity measures worsened, rail workers held a nationwide 24-hour strike against a proposed privatisation of 49 percent of the state rail network, TrainOSE, which was to launch a three-year programme of privatisations in exchange for onerous loan terms from the EU and IMF.

The privatisation of TrainOSE eventually took place under SYRIZA in 2017, with Ferrovie Dello Stato Italian—the Italian state-owned railway holding company—buying Greece's railway for just €45 million. This was followed by the newly privatised TrainOSE paying an equally knockdown purchase price of €22 million for the state rolling stock maintenance business EESSTY in 2018. More than five years after privatisation, safety systems are still not fully automated on Greece's antiquated rail network.

There have been many warnings that a serious incident could take place as a result of cuts and a failure to implement the required technology. Less than a month ago, referring to two recent train accidents on the same line, a circular from the train drivers union to its members read, "We are not going to wait for an 'upcoming train disaster' to see them [government, rail company] shed crocodile tears..."



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