

Train horror in India: Another crime of decaying capitalism

Arun Kumar, Patrick Martin
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The deadliest train crash in India in more than a quarter of a century has killed nearly 300 passengers and injured more than 1,000. It is a tragedy that has horrified the world and exposed the criminal neglect of basic infrastructure by the ultra-right regime of Hindu chauvinist Narendra Modi and the capitalist governments that preceded it.

Three trains collided in the Balasore district of the eastern Indian state of Odisha last Friday night, two of them high-speed passenger trains moving in opposite directions, the third a freight train heavily laden with iron ore. The Bahanaga Bazar station in Balasore is a four-line station, with two main lines in the middle and two loop lines on either side. The Shalimar-Chennai Central Coromandel Express from Shalimar in eastern India to Chennai in southern India was travelling at 128 kmph on one main line, and the Bengaluru-Howrah Superfast Express was coming from Bengaluru in the south at 126 kmph along the other main line.

According to one railway official, the southbound Coromandel Express diverted from the main line into the side loop, where it “crashed into a goods train full of iron ore stationed there” that “absorbed all the shock of the crash as it was very heavy.” Another official said that 12 of the 22 cars in the passenger train were derailed by the collision, and some were thrown in the path of the northbound Superfast Express, which smashed into them and itself derailed.

It is not yet known why the southbound train changed direction, but the crash is being attributed either to an incorrect signal or a malfunction of the signalling device. Before any investigation, the Modi government seized on the initial reports to pin responsibility on the railroad workforce at the local level to divert attention from how its own policies contributed to the disaster.

Shedding crocodile tears over the huge loss of life, Prime Minister Narendra Modi rushed to express his “distress” over the accident. “Whoever made the mistake, strong action will be taken,” he declared, making clear that scapegoats would be found and punished to cover up decades of neglect by successive governments.

In reality, the Indian ruling class, and Modi as their current representative, care nothing for the passengers smashed and dismembered in the collision. Most were migrant workers from across the states of West Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand who work in Chennai and nearby areas. Others were patients going for treatment in southern India’s private hospitals.

As media reports showed, the crash created a hellish scene filled with dismembered bodies. Rescuers could be seen climbing atop the wrecked trains to break open doors and windows using cutting torches, while local residents were trying to free the hundreds of people trapped in the rail cars.

A survivor from Coromandel Express, Ramesh, told ABP Nadu: “When the accident took place, the whole train wobbled and all of us fell down. We could not process anything. When we came out of the coach, we were shocked to witness multiple coaches derailed and one of the coaches crashed into another coach.”

Recollecting the horrific scene, Ramesh said that many of the people were stuck in the mangled remains of the train. Villagers immediately rushed for help and started rescuing the people. Eventually, the police and medical professionals reached the spot.

Modi’s Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said on Sunday that the reason for the accident was “a change in electronic interlocking” used to avoid collisions and that an investigation would show “who was responsible for that mistake.” But the statistics of deaths on the Indian rail network show that there is no “mistake” or “accident,” but the responsibility lies with successive governments.

Despite the horrific toll, Friday’s crash was exceeded by three other train disasters in Indian history, including a 1995 crash when some 358 people were killed in a collision between the Purushottam Express and the Kalindi Express near Firozabad in Uttar Pradesh in northern India.

Even worse is the daily death toll from passengers thrown off trains—most riding on rooftops of overcrowded passenger cars—and people killed on the tracks, run over by speeding trains. According to the most recent figures, 16,000 people died in 19,000 accidents in 2021 on the Indian rail system.

This averages out to 49 accidents per day, killing 45 people.

In an attempt to appease mounting anger over official negligence, Modi announced an ex-gratia payment of 200,000 rupees (\$US2,427) for the next of kin of the deceased, and 50,000 rupees for the injured from the PM's National Relief Fund (PMNRF). This is a drop in the bucket for a government that currently spends 6.33 trillion rupees (\$76.8 billion) on the military—the third largest war budget in the world, trailing only the US and China.

While the Modi government and state authorities now are desperately trying to cover up their own responsibility, it is clear that decades of neglect and cost-cutting have resulted in a serious erosion of rail infrastructure and necessary safety measures.

A report published in the *Hindu* on May 31, just two days before Friday's accident, which was headlined, "Increase in train accidents worries Indian Railways," stated:

The Railway Board recently took up the issue of loco pilots [locomotive engineers] being deployed over and above their prescribed working hours resulting in a threat to the safety of train operations. Going by the rules, duty hours of the crew could not exceed 12 hours under any circumstances, said the official, who did not want to be quoted. ... Worried over the increase in train accidents across the rail network, the Railway Board has called for urgent steps to fill vacancies and reduce the long working hours of locomotive pilots.

Advanced technologies are available to prevent "human errors" and "signal failures" but have not been widely implemented. Railway officials have admitted that the train anti-collision system "Kavach" was not available on the route where the Friday accident took place.

In any case, the experience of rail workers in many countries is that even when the most modern technology is introduced, it is not used to make railroad operation safer, but to increase the profits of the rail bosses and their financial backers. This has been the purpose of Precision-Scheduled Railroading (PSR), introduced in recent years in both the United States and Canada, which has been used to reduce railroad crews to the status of industrial serfs, on call 24/7 for work.

The Modi government's attitude to the carnage on the country's rail system reflects the same cynical indifference towards the lives of the poor working people evident in the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions of people were allowed to die because of the criminal policy of the pro-business regime

in failing to implement necessary health measures.

All over the world, the frenzied drive towards imperialist war and profit-gouging by the ruling elite has led to a colossal neglect in infrastructure building and maintenance. This is reflected in disasters such as the rail crash in Tempi, Greece, in which 57 people were killed, mostly students returning from their holidays, and the derailling of a Norfolk Southern train in East Palestine, Ohio, which poisoned the small town—air, water and soil—with chemicals carried in the train's tank cars.

In India, where the railroads are owned by the state, the same process is at work. The Modi government ignores public services, which are crucial for millions of workers and rural poor—a staggering 8.4 billion people use the railroad passenger system each year. Meanwhile, the government has been lavishly spending for military armaments, including highly sophisticated drones, warplanes, tanks, missiles and nuclear weapons, as it has rallied behind US imperialism in its war drive against China.

All the main bourgeois parties in India share responsibility for this program of militarism and war against the working class at home. The Congress Party, now in opposition, has ruled the country for more than half of the time since independence in 1947, and has likewise ignored basic safety in India's railway network.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, made a mild criticism of the neglect of rail safety, but it has propped up Congress Party governments and non-BJP coalitions for three decades, thus sharing their responsibility for the disaster. They are just as enthusiastic proponents of Indian capitalism as Congress and the BJP.

The latest rail disaster underscores the necessity of the political fight for socialism that puts the lives and pressing social needs of working people ahead of the drive for profit. It requires a redoubled struggle to clarify the central political questions facing the vast Indian working class and build a revolutionary alternative, a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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