

Rail disaster near Riedlingen, Germany: Why were the tracks not better protected?

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The site of the train accident near Riedlingen (Baden-Württemberg) presented a gruesome scene on Sunday evening. A regional train with four carriages had derailed, the train units were partially overturned and jammed together. Three people were killed, and 37 passengers were injured, some seriously. Among the dead were the 32-year-old train driver, another railway employee (36) who was travelling as a trainee and a 70-year-old woman.

At the accident site, the track runs in a deep cutting, with steep embankments rising to the left and right. On Sunday evening, a thunderstorm brought torrential rain; a drainage shaft on the road above the embankment overflowed and water cascaded down the slope. A landslide ensued, burying the tracks. When the RE 55 regional express from Sigmaringen to Ulm approached at high speed, the train units derailed, slid across the track bed and crashed frontally and laterally into the embankment. More than 50 passengers were on board; initial reports had listed as many as 100.

“There was a bang, and the whole train jumped, like something out of a cartoon,” a shocked young passenger who witnessed the accident told broadcaster SWR. The train then tilted slowly to one side. As the carriages telescoped into each other, he became trapped, as were the two passengers next to him. “I could barely breathe, diesel was pouring over my body the whole time, my face, into my mouth, my eyes ...”

Police, fire services, emergency medical teams and the Technical Assistance Agency (THW) were alerted, and several hundred helpers were quickly on the scene, including local residents. “The scene that presented itself was pure chaos,” said one THW employee. “At first it was impossible to take in.”

By midday on Monday, the political dignitaries had arrived. Baden-Württemberg Minister-President

Winfried Kretschmann (Greens) led Deutsche Bahn CEO Richard Lutz and the Federal Minister of Transport to the site. A heavy-duty special crane on rails was already lifting the carriages from the tracks.

The politicians shed their usual crocodile tears. Kretschmann expressed himself as “shaken and deeply affected.” Transport Minister Patrick Schneider (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) spoke of the “force of devastation that has swept through here.” The state transport minister, Winfried Hermann (Greens), told an SWR reporter apologetically that it was “difficult to keep everything under control. ... We must finally protect the climate effectively, not just deal with the consequences of climate change.”

But none of them explained how it was possible that the tracks were not better secured against such natural disasters.

Extreme rainfall has increased sharply over the past quarter of a century. According to experts, 9 percent of the German railway network is at risk from landslides, track burial and washout. The German Centre for Rail Transport Research (DZSF) at the Federal Railway Authority has long since produced a hazard map highlighting the vulnerable routes. The fact that the accident zone near Riedlingen is marked as “problematic” on that map had no consequences whatsoever.

For years, it has been technically possible to lay fibre-optic cables along the tracks in order to monitor their condition and detect potential damage, such as landslides, in good time. Through so-called Fibre Optic Sensing (FOS), train drivers and control centres could be warned in advance. In Alpine regions, in Switzerland and Austria, FOS has been in use for several years. It has also been trialed in Germany.

The technology is easy to install and not particularly

expensive. Why was it not installed here and at other similarly hazardous locations?

The answer is that at national rail operator Deutsche Bahn, the lives and well-being of employees and passengers do not take priority. The executives, who determine the fate of the railways, have placed profits above all else.

Deutsche Bahn CEO Richard Lutz—who shed tears at the accident site and claimed: “I mourn with the families for the dead”—is a prime example. Lutz draws an annual salary of over €2.1 million for turning the railways into a source of profit.

For years, Deutsche Bahn has systematically cut jobs, privatised lucrative assets and subjected unprofitable departments to harsh cuts. While executive pay has soared, wages and salaries of staff have continued to fall.

Both the EVG and the GDL unions support this policy. At the beginning of 2025, the EVG agreed to cuts in real wages for rail workers and a strike ban lasting 33 months. Before that, the GDL had already approved job cuts “as long as they take place in administration and not in operational departments,” thus contributing to divisions in the workforce.

The derailment at Riedlingen is not an isolated incident. For years, there have been repeated railway accidents, many of them fatal. In June 2024, two carriages of an ICE (express train) with 185 passengers on board derailed near Schwäbisch Gmünd following a landslide—fortunately without serious casualties. The accident at Garmisch-Partenkirchen in June 2022 was worse, with five fatalities.

Time and again, serious life-threatening and fatal workplace accidents occur along the tracks of Deutsche Bahn. In just one week last May, four railway workers died in separate accidents. Last year, there were at least 11 serious or fatal workplace accidents at Deutsche Bahn, and in 2023 there were at least 12, possibly more.

Unforgotten are the cases of 19-year-old rail trainee Simon Hedemann, who was killed while installing signaling and safety technology in Hanover-Linden, and 33-year-old points mechanic Ali Ceyhan, who was struck by a train at Cologne-Trimbornerstrasse and died of his severe injuries. In both cases, the bereaved families are still waiting for answers from Richard Lutz and the railway board about the exact circumstances of

the accidents.

In the United States, a rank-and-file action committee of autoworkers recently began an independent investigation into a fatal workplace accident. The committee is part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which explicitly asserts that the lives and well-being of working people and their families take precedence over the profit interests of executives and shareholders.

Last weekend, the first meeting of this independent action committee took place in Detroit, where David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the WSWs, declared that serious workplace accidents and fatalities were an inevitable consequence of capitalism:

The term “accident” is often used, but is that word adequate? If you walk across your room and you trip, that might be an accident. But when we are experiencing events that occur with staggering regularity ... these are no longer mere accidents in the conventional sense of the word. We’re seeing the operation of necessity.

This is the product of the system within which we live, not just in this country but in every part of the world. Our social life, our economic life, is organized in a way which produces, continuously, these disasters, and they will continue unless a way is found by putting an end to the system which produces these catastrophes.

Send us information and write to us if you can help build the Railway Action Committee! Register now using the form below!



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