

# For a rank-and-file inquiry into UK's Bedford train collision that killed driver and injured 100

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A train driver was killed and 100 people injured Friday evening, nine critical, when two East Midlands Railway (EMR) trains collided near Bedford, 50 miles north of London. Exposing the deadly consequences of decades of cost-cutting, privatisation and neglect on Britain's railways, it is the UK's worst rail disaster for more than 20 years.

The collision occurred at around 5:15 p.m. BST on the Midland Main Line south of Bedford, near Elstow. Both trains were bound for London St Pancras—the 4:40 p.m. service from Corby and the 3:50 p.m. service from Nottingham. The four-carriage Corby train ploughed into the rear of the five-carriage Nottingham service after it had come to a standstill on the line. East Midlands Railway services are operated by the private transport company Transport UK under contract to the Department for Transport.

The driver's cab of the moving train was crushed in the impact, killing the driver. Initially identified in media reports as a veteran railway worker and former Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) representative, on Sunday he was named as 60-year-old Shaun Burton. In a statement, his family said: "We are devastated by his loss. Our thoughts are also with those affected by this incident."

British Transport Police declared a major incident and East of England Ambulance Service dispatched more than 20 ambulances, supported by the fire service. The initial assessment of injuries was 89 but rose to 100 by Saturday afternoon. Of those injured, 28 remain in hospital, with nine of those patients in critical condition.

Scenes of chaos and terror were described by passengers aboard the train that ploughed into the service ahead.

Speaking to the *Guardian*, Dr. Peter Knapp recalled: "There was no indication of any collision, no screeching of wheels, nor sirens or alarms. Suddenly there was an impact. I thought it was a bomb. I saw a lot of smoke and people on the floor, bloodied faces. A lot of people crying and screaming."

Brett Byatt, a teacher, estimated that around 90 percent of passengers in his carriage were injured. Before emergency crews arrived, he and other passengers administered first aid to

the wounded.

Byatt's shock turned to anger, as he posed the question, "We've got one of the oldest railway networks, and signal failures happen a lot, and now I'm just wondering, why would a train driver lose his life over this?"

The self-serving reassurances issued by Labour government ministers and rail executives are aimed at preventing accountability. Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander declared herself "deeply saddened" by the driver's death but boasted Britain's railways remained "some of the safest in the world".

The investigation is assigned to the Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB), whose function the BBC described is to examine the causes, "not assign blame, establish liability or pursue prosecutions."

Alexander's claim, based on reputational damage control, that Britain's railways have a safety record to be proud of flies in the face of reality. The Bedford collision is the fourth major rail disaster in six years.

In August 2020, the Stonehaven derailment in Aberdeenshire killed three people—the driver, conductor and a passenger—and injured six others after a train struck debris washed onto the line during torrential rain. In October 2021, two trains collided near Salisbury after one passed a signal at danger, leaving a driver with life-changing injuries and sending 14 passengers to hospital. In October 2024, a head-on collision between trains on a single-track section at Talerddig in Powys killed passenger Tudor Evans and injured 15 others.

The Bedford collision happened on one of the principal intercity routes, carrying high-speed services between London and the East Midlands, and is equipped with signalling and train protection systems designed to prevent such a crash.

The brief statement issued by the RMT General Secretary Eddie Dempsey expressed condolences to "family, friends, colleagues and the ASLEF [train drivers] trade union at this awful time." But the crash raises questions about what union officials have done to halt the rise in deadly rail disasters.

Rail workers have for years raised concerns over maintenance backlogs, infrastructure failures and the consequences of relentless cost-cutting.

According to reports, the RAIB will investigate whether a faulty Automatic Warning System (AWS) on the first train was linked to signalling failures that allowed the second train to enter an occupied section of line.

AWS installations warn train drivers when they are approaching a restrictive signal aspect, such as a yellow or red signal. The system sounds a warning horn and displays a bright yellow “sunflower” indicator in the cab, requiring the driver to acknowledge the warning.

The *Telegraph* reported, “Several insiders who have seen official logs of the event told The Telegraph that the train had suffered a fault with its [AWS] installation.

“At 5.11pm, the service came to a halt at signal WH152, about two-and-a-half miles south of Bedford at a point with a farmer’s field on one side and an asphalt plant on the other. There, the driver called controllers for technical help with the AWS fault.”

Key signals WH154 and WH152 may not have been fitted with the Train Protection and Warning System (TPWS), which automatically applies the brakes if a train approaches a signal at danger.

The line had not been upgraded with the European Train Control System (ETCS), a modern digital signalling system that continuously monitors a train’s speed and position and can automatically apply the brakes if safe operating limits are exceeded. Rail safety experts have long pointed to ETCS as a major advance over Britain’s ageing signalling infrastructure.

The neglect of safety predates the government-employer offensive launched through the Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG), established in 2021 to impose £2 billion in cuts through pay restraint, job losses and attacks on working practices, including safety-critical roles. The Rail Delivery Group (RDG)—the industry body founded in 2011 representing the private train operating companies and Network Rail—was directly embedded in the RIRG’s governance structure. The RDG thus provided the apparatus through which the rail companies coordinated with union officials and the government to plan and implement cuts.

The response of the RMT, ASLEF, Unite and other union bureaucracies was not to mobilise a united struggle against these attacks but to accept the framework in return for a role in implementing restructuring.

In the rail strikes from 2022 onwards—which were part of a nationwide strike wave—the RMT and ASLEF leaderships were forced into a struggle against pay restraint, but they ensured this was divorced from opposition to the RDG agenda of slashing jobs, productivity increases and diminution of safety.

After two years of staggered and divided action, the movement was wound down. Then-RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch ended the strikes involving 20,000 RMT members in April 2023 employed in maintenance and signalling at Network Rail on a below-inflation settlement of 9 percent over two years, which allowed the destruction of 1,950 maintenance

jobs.

The dispute was ended altogether in November that year through a sellout agreement with the train companies foisted on station staff, conductors and drivers after 33 days of strikes. Lynch acknowledged that the first year’s 5 percent increase was “below inflation” but spun the deal as a “stand-alone” agreement, while later years were tied to “workplace reform”—a euphemism for job losses and attacks on terms and conditions.

ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan ended strikes by train drivers after 18 days, accepting a 14 percent deal over three years from the incoming Starmer government in September 2024, tied to negotiations on a company-by-company basis on productivity demands.

The function of both self-styled “left” union leaders was to channel workers behind the Labour government—which adopted wholesale the Conservatives’ Great British Railways project, mis-sold as a return to public ownership.

Labour avoids even using the term nationalisation to describe it. Great British Railways only allowed for taking back control of the 10 remaining services run by train companies once their contracts expire during 2024-2029. They retain a highly fragmented rail system, with freight and rolling stock remaining in the private sector plundered for profit.

Official investigations into Stonehaven, Salisbury and Powys identified technical and operational failures, but no senior minister, rail executive or Network Rail manager faced any consequences.

Rail workers cannot leave the Bedford investigation in the hands of government departments, Network Rail, train operators and union officials whose policies have helped create the conditions for catastrophe.

An independent rank-and-file inquiry is required, conducted by railway workers and supported by engineers, safety specialists and passengers. It must examine not only the immediate causes of the collision but the cumulative impact of privatisation, maintenance cuts, job losses and productivity drives. Only through the independent mobilisation of rail workers can the truth be uncovered and future tragedies prevented.



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