

Initial report on Bedford train collision confirms need for an independent rank-and-file inquiry

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Last Friday's train collision near Bedford, England, claimed the life of 60-year-old train driver Shaun Burton and injured 162 passengers, with 102 requiring hospital treatment and eight remaining in a critical condition as of Wednesday.

The collision between two East Midlands Railway (EMR) services occurred at around 5:15 p.m. 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 (train 1H46) crashed into the rear of the 3:50 p.m. Nottingham-to-London service (train 1B67) after it had come to a standstill on the line.

The horrific crash immediately raised questions about the state of Britain's railway infrastructure and safety systems. Speaking to the media, Brett Byatt, a teacher travelling on the train that struck the stationary service and who helped provide first aid to the injured, said:

"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?"

This question goes to the heart of the issues government investigators are already seeking to evade and conceal.

The preliminary findings of the Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB), published Wednesday, foreground Burton's train having passed a red signal before colliding with the stationary service. However, based on data still being analysed from the on-train data recorders (OTDR) the report states that "it is not yet possible to say what indication the driver received from the AWS (Automatic Warning System) equipment on the train or how they responded to this."

The AWS sounds a bell or chime when approaching a signal displaying a green aspect (the indication shown by the signal) and a horn when approaching any other aspect. The warning is intended to alert the driver to an upcoming signal restriction or speed change. The RAIB report confirms that emergency braking was initiated by train 1H46 only around nine seconds before impact. The train's speed was reduced from approximately 76 mph (122 km/h) to around 49 mph (79 km/h) at the point of collision.

The report also acknowledges that train 1B67 had suffered a

safety-system failure and had "come to a stop unexpectedly because a fault had developed with the Automatic Warning System (AWS) equipment fitted to it, which caused the brakes to apply."

The fundamental issues concerning signalling infrastructure, train protection systems and equipment failures are relegated to a handful of bullet points for future examination on the sequence of events, with no date set for publication of a final report.

RAIB admits that it still needs to investigate "the performance of braking, AWS and other safety systems on train 1H46" as well as "the reason train 1B67 stopped" and the status of signal WH154 and its AWS equipment, as well as its positioning, visibility, and conspicuity"

The examination of these potentially systemic failures is deferred while a narrative is established that Burton—the principal victim of the disaster—was responsible. The *Telegraph*, for example, ran the headline, "Train driver passed through red signal before Bedford crash."

A glaring omission from the RAIB's preliminary findings is that the signalling system on this section of the line on one of Britain's principal intercity rail routes was not equipped with the Train Protection and Warning System (TPWS).

TPWS automatically applies a train's brakes if it approaches a signal at danger and is designed to prevent precisely the type of collision that occurred at Bedford.

Dave Calfe, general secretary of ASLEF – the train drivers union – issued a statement acknowledging that "TPWS – train protection and warning system – has been installed throughout much of Britain's railway network. Unfortunately, TPWS had not been installed here.

"If TPWS had been installed, this accident would not have happened, the driver would not have died, and no passengers would have been injured."

Yet Calfe then moved to provide the RAIB investigation with a clean bill of health: "We now need to wait for the full RAIB report to understand, in detail, what happened, and what went wrong, and what lessons there are to learn."

There was no warning against attempts to scapegoat Burton

as part of an emerging cover-up or demand that those responsible for safety decisions be held publicly accountable.

Calfe instead echoed Labour Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander's assertions about Britain's supposedly exemplary rail safety record:

"Britain's railway is one of the safest in the world. To keep it that way, we have to invest, now, in the safety systems and technology to ensure it stays that way."

This whitewashes the impact of decades of privatisation, fragmentation and profit-driven restructuring is an indictment of the union bureaucracy. The Bedford collision is the fourth major preventable rail disaster in six years: the Stonehaven train derailment in August 2020; the Salisbury train collision in October 2021; and the head-on collision of trains at Talerddig, Powys, in October 2024.

Each incident exposed serious safety failures. Each generated official investigations and recommendations. Yet no senior government minister, rail executive or Network Rail manager has been held criminally responsible for the deaths of rail workers and a passenger and dozens of injuries.

The RAIB is not an independent investigator. It is a state agency established by legislation, funded through the Department for Transport and staffed largely by personnel drawn from the rail industry, regulatory bodies and government institutions. Its remit states that it "does not apportion blame, establish liability, enforce the law or pursue prosecutions."

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) has yet to comment on the RAIB's preliminary findings. General Secretary Eddie Dempsey could muster only a brief statement of condolences to Burton—a former RMT rep—and his family, friends and colleagues.

ASLEF and the RMT bureaucracy are allowing a whitewash to proceed on behalf of Network Rail—the government-owned infrastructure body responsible for Britain's railway infrastructure—and Transport UK Group, which operates EMR under government contract.

Both unions joined the corporatist framework of the Rail Industry Recovery Group established in 2021 to ram through £2 billion in cost-cutting, including pay restraint, job losses and attacks on working practices, including safety-critical roles.

The 18-month national rail strike of 2022-23 was demobilised through a series of sellout agreements under RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch. Network Rail workers strike action was ended in April 2023 with a substandard pay deal that accepted the elimination of 1,950 maintenance jobs. This was followed by the settlement in November that year covering train drivers, conductors and station staff with the private train companies—combining below-inflation pay settlements with productivity demands and sweeping changes to working practices.

ASLEF and the RMT have promoted the fiction that Labour's Great British Railways (GBR) project represents a genuine renationalisation of the railways. It merely transfers

passenger services back under government control as existing operating contracts with private train operators expire by 2029. The rail system will remain fragmented, while freight operators and rolling stock companies continue to operate for private profit.

The RMT and Trades Union Congress issued a joint statement on June 26 over skilled rail engineering workers at contractor Balfour Beatty facing 67 compulsory redundancies and warning of the loss of "highly skilled rail engineering staff would further weaken the industry's skills base".

But this makes no reference to the Bedford collision and the consequences for safety. It only calls on the government for mitigation "through the allocation of alternative work," even while acknowledging the jobs cull by the contractor is determined by Network Rail "funding decisions" and forms only part of "the government warning that tens of thousands of rail workers will leave the industry by the end of the decade."

Instead of mobilising rail workers against government austerity, the statement calls for bringing "together employers, unions and Network Rail to identify solutions that protect these jobs."

Official investigations into Stonehaven, Salisbury and Talerddig identified technical and operational failings, but no senior minister, rail executive or Network Rail manager faced any consequences. The same pattern is emerging over Bedford. As the *World Socialist Web Site* article stated:

"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."

We urge train drivers, maintenance engineers and all rail workers to contact the WSWs with testimony on the impact of cuts and neglect of safety which will be treated in confidence.



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