

Rail worker calls for independent workers' inquiry into Bedford rail crash that killed driver Shaun Burton

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The opening of the inquest into the death of East Midlands Railway driver Shaun Burton confirmed the need for an independent workers' inquiry into the Bedford rail disaster that took his life. The crash injured 162 passengers and train crew.

Burton, 60, was killed on June 19 when his Corby-to-London St Pancras service drove into the rear of a stationary Nottingham-to-London train near Elstow, south of Bedford. The provisional cause of Shaun's death was recorded as unsurvivable "traumatic injuries to the brainstem and chest, pending further investigations."

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a 35-year veteran rail worker Martin on why he supports the call by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees for a worker-led inquiry:

"I want to start by sending my heartfelt condolences to Shaun's family on his untimely death and to all those injured and mentally scarred by their horrific experience. Shaun's family, injured passengers and all rail workers deserve answers. These will not come from the official inquiry. The call for an independent workers' inquiry needs to be supported by all colleagues, regardless of grade or union. We are in a race against time to prevent the next disastrous incident."

The Rail Accident Investigation Branch's (RAIB) preliminary report found that Burton's train passed a caution signal and then a red signal before colliding with the stationary train. The emergency brake was put into full service nine seconds before the collision, reducing the train's speed from 76 mph to 49 mph. The stationary train had stopped after an Automatic Warning System (AWS) fault had applied the brakes automatically.

The RAIB is not an independent body and has stressed that it has not determined why Burton's train passed the signal at danger. Based on decades of experience, Martin said "There is a well-known remark I heard after joining the railway that 'dead men cannot defend themselves'. I understood what

was meant when a highly respected colleague was killed in a tragic incident. The inquiry focused on his actions and not the circumstances.

"Shaun knew every mile per hour he could reduce speed would save dozens of lives. He should not have been put in this situation. A question I have for the Workers Inquiry is most modern trains when the emergency brake is applied automatically the drivers cab door automatically flies open so he can escape. Was his train fitted with one and did it work?"

Martin pointed to one of the most significant findings in the preliminary report—the absence of a Train Protection and Warning System (TPWS) installation in the area. TPWS is designed to apply a train's brakes automatically if it approaches certain red signals too fast and is vital in preventing serious collisions.

Martin said "If everyone now accepts TPWS could have prevented this disaster, then why wasn't it installed? Who the hell made such a decision? It was not Shaun, that is for certain. We need to know the chain of command on this; the workers inquiry should name names. Was there a risk assessment? Was cost a factor in not installing it? Who made that decision? How many other signals across Britain remain without this more advanced protection? Those who made these decisions need to be made accountable."

Martin rejected attempts to treat Bedford as an isolated incident.

"I have worked on the railway through previous major incidents including Southall, Ladbroke Grove, Hatfield, Potters Bar, Stonehaven, Salisbury, Talerddig and now Bedford. Each incident had different immediate causes, but a generally recurring theme in my opinion is the placing of cost effectiveness over safety."

Martin argued the Bedford collision must be seen in the context of the sweeping restructuring of Britain's railways since the Covid pandemic.

"Governments and rail operators have demanded billions

of pounds in “efficiency savings”, while thousands of maintenance, engineering and operational jobs have been targeted for elimination through ‘voluntary’ redundancy. When I began on the railway in the 1980s the National Union of Railwaymen (now the Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union) said there was no such thing as voluntary redundancy. Now they have adopted it as their way of collaborating with job cutting.

“My colleagues put in a tremendous effort every day into ensuring the railway operates safely. From track inspections, maintaining signal systems, repairs and train operations. It involves high levels of concentration and is exhausting. Every maintenance job lost, inspection delays, each unfilled vacancy has a cumulative effect on safety. We cannot yet prove cuts caused the Bedford crash, but a workers’ investigation would be carried out in this context.

“The official investigation will focus on the immediate sequence of events. A workers’ inquiry will also address more decisive questions. Were maintenance issues outstanding? Were staffing levels adequate? Had workers raised concerns about the AWS? What action was taken? From my own experience Shaun’s colleagues will have a great deal to say.”

Martin traced these developments to the Rail Industry Recovery Group, established in 2021 to oversee billions of pounds in savings. “Modernisation was the buzz word. It meant thousands of skilled jobs went, with those left behind taking enormous extra strain to cover for those jobs. They keep coming back with more and more cost cutting exercises, shocking in their implications.”

The restructuring reached its sharpest expression during the 2022-23 national rail disputes, when around 40,000 workers struck against below-inflation pay, attacks on conditions and maintenance job losses.

Martin said, “I’ll give you a title for your article, ‘From the 2022-23 rail strikes to the Bedford Crash’. We were willing to strike and prepared to carry out a general strike to prevent these cuts. Instead, the strikes were wound down. The Network Rail sell out was particularly hard to swallow. It cost around 1,950 maintenance jobs. There was a collective gulp when it went through. We all knew major incidents were only a matter of time. Eddie Dempsey, now general secretary of the RMT [Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union], pushed that deal through.”

for Shaun Burton and his family and all those injured. But sympathy is not enough. If union leaders accept that TPWS could have prevented this crash, they should be demanding to know why it wasn’t installed and who made that decision. There is not even a whiff of industrial action coming from the national executives to force the issue of total TPWS coverage. It would have won massive support also from the public, as the strikes did after the Tempi rail disaster in Greece. Instead, we are told to respect the official investigation. Well, many colleagues don’t respect it. It’s a well-oiled cynical routine that I’m sick to death of seeing.”

Martin demanded an end to cost cutting and job losses in maintenance “You would think in the immediate aftermath of the Bedford crash a halt would be called to all cuts to engineering and maintenance jobs. Instead on June 26 the RMT announced a campaign with the Trades Union Congress to protect 67 Balfour Beatty engineering contractors jobs at Crewe and Preston depots. They are calling on the Labour government to act, not their members.

“I want to speak on the Great British Railways project that was touted by the Starmer government as a way forward. It’s not a return to 1947-style nationalisation. It’s a systemic government-level cost-cutting exercise to reduce staffing to a bare minimum.

“All grades from all unions need to mount a challenge to the official narrative. A workers’ inquiry should gather testimony, examine safety reports, staffing levels, maintenance schedules, risk assessments, and publish its findings. For me its purpose would be to establish at all levels of organisational, technical and political decision involved in the events leading up to the collision.

“Mine is a call to all railway colleagues. Bring your expertise to bear brothers and sisters. Popularise the call for a worker’ inquiry in your depots, sheds and stations. The demand must be ‘No More Shaun Burtons!’”



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Union sellouts and the Bedford crash

“Following Bedford, the unions have expressed sympathy