

Lewes train derailment raises fresh alarm over Britain's rail network safety

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The derailment of a Southern Railway train on August 13 near Lewes in East Sussex has thrust the safety crisis on Britain's rail network into the spotlight once again. It comes within two months of the June 19 Bedford crash between two East Midlands Railway (EMR) trains which claimed the life of driver Shaun Burton and left 162 injured.

A routine journey was turned into a terrifying ordeal for the 150 passengers and the train crew on the London Victoria service to Eastbourne. It derailed just before 4pm, leaving three of the rear eight carriages on their side, strewn across the downward slope of the embankment.

The exact cause has yet to be confirmed. Aerial photographs and those from passengers show a section of track clearly buckled. Extreme heat causes a "buckling" effect to steel rails exposed to direct sunlight, making them 20C hotter than the air temperature. The UK experienced its hottest day of the year that day, during its fifth heatwave of 2026, reaching 38.1C in the South.

Extreme weather is exacerbating problems with ageing tracks that have suffered from years of insufficient maintenance and renewal. In extreme heat, rails expand, while forces generated by passing trains can destabilise the track and increase the risk of buckling.

A local resident told the *Argos* newspaper he had seen a large freight train pass over the same section of track earlier in the day: "I was going fishing this morning. I crossed over the track on a bridge, when a cargo train went through with about 20 carriages on it. It must have had 20 tonnes on each carriage," he estimated. "That's not going to do the railway line any good is it?"

Emergency services mounted a "major incident" operation to attend the wounded and evacuate passengers. The operation required over 50 ambulance staff, 10 fire engines, rescue units and air ambulances. Two passengers were rushed to major trauma centres with serious injuries and a further 18 required hospital treatment.

Rachel Heath, a passenger in one of the carriages which overturned, told BBC Radio 4: "The train just started jostling, kind of bumping up and down, and then jostling from side to side like a seesaw, and everyone was screaming. I just remember looking around and seeing so much panic and fear in so many people's eyes.

"Then all of a sudden it felt like we had almost lifted into the air and then came back down and the train just fell on to its side, and there were a lot of children on board and all of the windows had broken. Just a very, very harrowing experience."

The Labour government's response since the Bedford crash has been a mixture of political damage control and indifference. Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander declared that Britain's railways were "some of the safest in the world".

Immediately following the Lewes derailment, she tweeted: "Deeply concerned of reports of a derailment involving a Southern train in Lewes, Sussex.

"Grateful to emergency services who are on the scene supporting those impacted. We are working quickly with the rail industry and local partners to assist passengers."

This was the fifth major rail accident in six years, with three occurring since Labour took office in July 2024.

On Friday, within 24 hours of the Lewes incident, there was another derailment, involving a Greater Anglia train in Wickford, Essex. The rear two carriages derailed but remained upright. Emergency services assessed all 62 passengers before determining they did not require hospital treatment.

Rail workers and the public are told to entrust investigations to the Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB), funded by the Department for Transport, whose remit states that it "does not apportion blame, establish liability, enforce the law or pursue prosecutions".

The RAIB's preliminary report on the Bedford collision foregrounded the immediate cause of the crash: the Corby

to London train operated by Shaun Burton passed a red signal and collided with the back of the Nottingham to London train, which had become stationary on the same section of the track.

However, the stationary event involving the EMR Class 810 train was caused by a malfunctioning Automatic Warning System (AWS) which had applied the brakes, and the report had not established whether AWS on Burton's train was fully operational.

The report did not address an issue that, if addressed, would have prevented the crash entirely: why this section of the rail network for intercity services is not equipped with the Train Protection and Warning System (TPWS), which automatically applies a train's brakes when approaching a signal at danger. This is to avoid scrutiny on Network Rail, the government's arm's-length infrastructure body responsible for making such critical investment decisions.

Network Rail has faced years of funding constraints, efficiency drives and cuts to renewals and maintenance, placing further pressure on rail infrastructure.

The train that derailed near Lewes was running on track managed by Network Rail's Southern region. The region has faced funding pressures that have meant some planned track renewals have been delayed, with greater reliance on repairs and other work to keep existing infrastructure in service.

In 2025–26, the region completed just 55 percent of the renewals volume set out in its original DP24 baseline. The rail regulator, the Office of Rail and Road (ORR), has warned that delaying renewals can increase the risk of asset deterioration and the reliability of the railway.

The truth about the causes of the Bedford crash and Lewes derailment, and the action required to restore safety, will not come through the regulator, RAIB or the Labour government. They have allowed EMR, run by private operator Transport Group UK, to continue to put faulty Class 810 trains built by Hitachi into service, risking another Bedford-type disaster.

The fight to assert safety has only been taken forward by rail workers. At EMR, train conductors in the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) have struck over the past three Saturdays demanding the new fleet of Class 810 trains is withdrawn until proved safe and fit for purpose.

EMR has put trains into service known to be prone to failure, issuing briefings to control, signalling and operations staff to conduct an auxiliary On/Off reset to clear faults. The process takes 20 minutes, in which there

are no active safety systems and with communication lost between train drivers, dispatchers, and trackside. According to the RMT, a full auxiliary reset has been required on 16 units over the past month.

RMT General Secretary Eddie Dempsey has said that the union's door is open to EMR, even as the company flouts safety and acts with impunity in collusion with the Labour government.

The staggered stoppages mounted by workers must be extended into a national campaign to insist on safety against the reckless pursuit of profit by Transport Group UK. An appeal must be made to members of ASLEF, the main drivers' union, to join the action—against its leadership's refusal to mobilise drivers, leaving them exposed to the same risks and endangering passengers.

A fight is needed by all rail workers against the private profiteers and the Labour government's austerity measures. This must be combined with building support for an independent workers' inquiry into the Bedford crash and the Lewes and Wickford derailments. It must examine not only the AWS fault and absence of TPWS on sections of the network but the cumulative impact of privatisation, maintenance cuts and job losses, naming those responsible for decisions which have sacrificed safety.

The reorganisation of Britain's railways must begin with a rejection of Labour's imposition of the Tories' Great British Railways model. This leaves intact the fragmentation of the system, with freight and rolling stock remaining in private hands to make profits, and companies such as FirstGroup and Arriva continuing to run major passenger services under "open access" agreements.

The continued subsidising of private profiteers cannot be reconciled with a safe, reliable railway. The alternative is a unified railway brought into public ownership and placed under workers' control, made affordable and provided with the resources needed for renewal, maintenance, staffing and safety. These measures can be funded from the wealth now hoarded by the super-rich oligarchy and squandered on the military.



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