

Train collision in Mid-Wales leaves one passenger dead and 15 requiring hospital treatment

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The head-on collision between two passenger trains in Mid-Wales on Monday evening has highlighted critical safety failing affecting the tracks and signalling system operated by Network Rail, the arms-length government body responsible for UK rail infrastructure.

The collision involved the 18:31 westbound service from Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth, which continued for about 800 metres beyond where it should have stopped, hitting a stationary 19:09 train from Machynlleth to Shrewsbury.

The trains were both two-carriage sprinters (Class 158), colliding on the Cambrian line which consists of long sections of rural single track. The crash occurred at Talerddig, Powys at around 7.26 pm on October 21.

The entirely preventable accident claimed the life of a man in his sixties named Tudor Evans, who died several hours later, and left 15 other passengers requiring hospital treatment for injuries ranging from broken teeth to cracked ribs.

The list of casualties could have been higher, with trains carrying just 41 passengers between them—this is according to unconfirmed reports as no official account has been provided. It was only on Wednesday that Transport for Wales (TfW) confirmed one of the train drivers was “quite badly injured” having been trapped in his cab, and that a conductor had suffered a fracture.

The Rail Accidents Investigations Branch (RAIB) has reported initial evidence suggesting the collision occurred at the speed of around 24 kph (15 mph). Its inspection of the track on approach to the point of collision “found evidence that wheel/rail adhesion was relatively low, suggesting that the train may have entered into wheel slide braking.”

Network Rail and TfW issued a joint statement which included the perfunctory line, “We are working closely with other agencies, including emergency services, to understand how this incident happened and they will have our full support.”

Anthony Hursford, a passenger on board the stationary

Shrewsbury-bound service, told *BBC Breakfast*, “Somehow my body bent the leg of a table and ripped it off its bolts attached to the wall. Suddenly I was on the floor with my laptop strewn ahead of me, wondering what the hell had happened.”

The Labour government’s Transport Secretary Louise Haigh trotted out the type of pro-forma statement which has followed previous rail disasters, stating, “Safety on our railways is my absolute priority and we are working at pace with Transport for Wales and Network Rail to understand what happened and how we can better prevent it going forward.”

The RAIB announced on Tuesday evening that it was working with the British Transport Police, the Office of Rail and Road and the railways companies to “secure the necessary evidence to support our independent safety investigation.”

Serious safety flaws have already come to light demonstrating how the loss of life, injuries and trauma were completely avoidable.

The two passenger trains travelling in opposite directions should never been able to enter the same section of single track. On either side of the section there are track loops with points to allow trains to enter a short section of track alongside the single line. The collision occurred about 900 metres beyond the passing loop where the train travelling to Aberystwyth would have been due to stop and wait to enable the other train to pass.

The last passenger train collision, on October 31, 2021 in Salisbury at the Fisherton Tunnel, left a train driver with “life-changing” injuries and 14 passengers requiring hospital treatment. A *Guardian* article reported the findings of the investigation in that crash, which found leaves on the line had reduced the ability of the driver to brake in time and caused the train to pass a red signal. It added in relation to Powys crash, “the low speed and the time of year, all make leaf fall a likely line of inquiry, especially given the track

was in a deeply wooded region of Powys.”

This brings into question whether procedures by National Rail’s Railhead Treatment Trains (RHTT)—employed to blast the leaves from the tracks using high pressure water jets—were effectively carried out and properly inspected.

Another issue pointed to in the *Guardian* is why the “hi-tech” signalling system designed to automatically cause a train to brake if another train is ahead failed. It explains that Mid-Wales was the pilot 10 years ago for the introduction of digital signalling and train control systems known as European rail traffic management systems (ERTMS) and European train control system (ETCS). That system was the cause of investigations by the RAIB in October 2017 over the “loss” of safety-critical data on the Cambrian line—after temporary speed restrictions due to weather conditions were “not relayed properly”, which led to trains travelling at unsafe speeds.

The responsibility for the train collision does not stop with Network Rail, but brings into question the safety systems of Tfw, which took over rail services from the private operator KeoleyAmis in 2021. Tfw is run as an arms-length body owned by the Welsh government under Labour Party control.

An article in rail transport industry magazine *Modern Railways* notes that South Western Railway, whose trains were involved in the Salisbury collision, had fitted variable rate sanders to its Class 158/9 fleet. These provide “significant reductions in stopping distances during adverse railhead conditions compared to standard constant flow equipment” according to the Railway Safety and Standards Board. It reported that Tfw has not done so and “its 24 European Train Control System-fitted ‘158s’ are due to be replaced by CAF (new fleet), with driver training expected in 2025.”

Media coverage has largely sought to downplay the Powys train crash based on the statements from Network Rail and Tfw that it was a “low speed collision” and the injuries sustained were not “life threatening” or “life changing”, based on police reports.

Excluded from this co-ordinated attempt to nullify genuine concerns and anger over the disregard for safety is any reference to the job cutting offensive Network Rail mounted against its own workforce under the guise of “modernising maintenance”. Around 20,000 maintenance and signalling workers, members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), were an integral part of strike action held during 2002/3 on the national rail, which also included 20,000 rail workers at the 14 train operating companies (TOCs) in England.

Their opposition was worn down by the on-off strikes prescribed by the union and ended in April 2023 after the

RMT executive pulled industrial action the month before. This was to ram through a ballot based not only on a pitifully revised below-inflation pay deal of around 10 percent over two years, but also the enforcement of around 1, 950 job cuts in maintenance.

According to a *Guardian* article in March 2023, Network Rail chair Andrew Haines likened the outcome to the one-sided war led by Britain and the US against Iraq in 2003 and told a rail conference in London, “the strike ended with a sub-inflation deal, one of the best from the employers’ view in many years, because ‘the stakeholder, the government was prepared to tolerate more pain than in the previous 14 years...’”

This surrender by the RMT executive accounts for its entirely muted response to the Powys trains crash. To date, all it has produced is a press release on October 22 with a single paragraph from general secretary Mick Lynch, saying, “This is a tragic incident and the thoughts of everyone at RMT are with the family and friends of the passenger who died, and all the train crew and travelling public who were injured during this accident.”

Lynch, along with ASLEF union leader Mick Whelan, are totally preoccupied with maintaining the political fiction that the Labour government’s Great British Railways (GBR) plan heralds a return to nationalisation. This despite the fact that the term is never used in the plans, which only allow for taking back control of the 10 remaining services run by TOCs once their contracts expire in the next five years. They retain a highly fragmented rail system, with freight and rolling stock remaining in the private sector to be plundered for profit.

GBR is also dedicated to enforcing “cost efficiencies” which have already seen £2 billion of cuts since 2022, towards a target of £2.6 billion by 2024-5.

Rail workers should not allow the Powys crash to pass without serious investigation. They should take up the demand for an independent inquiry conducted by the rank and file to get to the real root of safety failings in the continued drive for austerity and subordination of public services to private profits.



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