

# Take back the track

## *Britain's railways*

**B**ritain's railways have gone from public service to public laughing stock in just five years. Since the privatisation of the railways the country has suffered from an inferior and unsafe service, profiteering and incompetence.

The result has been train crashes at

- Southall, where many people died because of signalling errors;
- Ladbroke Grove, where 31 people died because of poor signalling and poor driver training; and
- Hatfield, where four people died because of a derailment caused by a broken rail on a poorly maintained track.

### **The great sell-off**

Between 1994 and 1996 British Rail was broken into 100 different pieces. The government sold each of these pieces to the private sector. The pieces include 25 train operating companies; 13 maintenance and infrastructure companies; a few rail freight companies; and three companies which own the trains and other rolling stock. At the same time Railtrack was practically given away to the stock market in 1996. Railtrack is responsible for maintaining the signals, track and stations and ensuring the system is safe.

Never has so much been given away for so little to so few. For example, the managers who bought the rolling stock

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*Mick Rix considers the privatisation of the railways in Britain and efforts to restore the railways to public ownership.*

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companies decided to sell their companies after a few months. Their initial investment of R1,15-million turned into R195,5-million. Also, Railtrack shareholders have seen the payouts from their shares increase drastically - most recently in the aftermath of the Hatfield crash. This was surely a landmark in greedy corporate insensitivity.

Despite receiving massive subsidies from government, Railtrack puts shareholder enrichment first. For example, in May the government gave Railtrack R17,25-billion to fix the infrastructure, which has deteriorated under Railtrack's ownership. Yet on the same day Railtrack paid out over 10% of that figure to its shareholders.

And in June, Railtrack announced that it had given its former chief executive Gerald Corbett, a parting present of R17,25-million. Corbett was in charge at the time of the Ladbroke Grove and Hatfield crashes, and while the network deteriorated. Adding insensitivity to greed, this was announced in the same week as the report into the Ladbroke Grove accident. The report found that Railtrack

was largely responsible for the accident because of its poor management of the railway infrastructure.

The fragmented system, driven by profit rather than public service, has meant:

- insufficient investment in safety;
- inadequate maintenance of the railway infrastructure;
- inefficient planning and coordination of services; and
- big share payouts for shareholders.

### Enough is enough

The Hatfield crash was however a turning point. In January, the three rail unions – Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA), the National Union of Rail, Maritime, Transport Workers (RMT) and the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) – launched the ‘Take back the track’ campaign.

The campaign aims to restore Railtrack to public ownership. This would be the first step towards bringing the whole railway industry back into the public sector. It could end the fragmentation and permanent chaos, which privatisation has caused and which looks likely to continue.

The campaign has already attracted a great deal of support. Supporters include over 100 Members of Parliament (MPs), political parties, London mayor Ken Livingstone, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), other unions and environment and community groups.

Recent opinion polls suggest that this could be one of the most popular campaigns of the moment. One poll showed that 76% of the public are in favour of restoring the railways to public ownership.

### Safety first

The fragmentation of the railway industry and the substitution of the public service

ideal by the profit culture have done great damage. We cannot reverse this or renew the railways while the industry remains badly mismanaged and structured as it is.

A publicly owned Railtrack could really mean it when it says that safety comes first. It would not have to prioritise shareholder interests. British Rail had its shortcomings, but it had the best safety systems of its time. British Rail also had a culture, which gave safety the highest priority. Safety was more important than profit or contractual relationships.

A publicly owned Railtrack should take back direct responsibility for maintenance and safety work. Currently this work is subcontracted and sub-subcontracted out. The result is that no one is in charge and companies blame each other.

### ‘Make it ours again’

The Government has promised R690-billion to improve the rail network over the next ten years – a significant amount of it taxpayers’ money.

Someone must ensure that the money is spent sensibly. Only then will it lead to safer, more reliable and faster journeys. A publicly owned Railtrack, answerable to ministers, would give the railway the leadership and strategic direction it needs.

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*‘there is a growing tide of support to make Railtrack ours again’*

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As Gwyneth Dunwoody, chairperson of the House of Commons transport subcommittee said recently ‘there is a growing tide of support to make Railtrack ours again’.

The general public still regards the railways as a public service. Therefore the





*Mick Rix of ASLEF*

public expects the government to play a leading role in the management of the railways. Indications are that a review of the performance and ownership of Railtrack would be massively popular with the public. The longer the current farce is allowed to continue the worse it will get for government – and the passenger.

### **The London Underground**

Bizarrely, the government is seeking to repeat many of the problems of railway privatisation with its proposals for the London Underground.

Government is proposing to split train operations from infrastructure management and maintenance. Train operations will then stay in the public sector. The government will transfer infrastructure management and maintenance to private companies for a 30-year period. Many of these companies are the ones responsible for the maintenance, or lack of it, on the main line railway network.

London mayor Ken Livingstone has

described the companies bidding to control the infrastructure as the 'scum of British capitalism'. These companies would try to maximise their money by getting maintenance done as cheaply as possible. We have seen what that leads to.

This scheme for the London Underground, called a public-private partnership (PPP), is about the worst possible option to give the Underground the investment it so badly needs.

A PPP is a scheme that guarantees only one thing – rich rewards for the companies involved. The companies have been set incredibly low performance targets to make their money. These targets are 5% below the present dreadful standard of service on the Underground.

The PPP scheme only addresses the running of the existing network. It does not allow for enhancement and development, something the London Underground urgently requires.

If these companies fail to do the job properly, the London taxpayers will pay for it. For the passenger, it means higher fares and the same consequences of fragmentation that have ruined the mainline railway.

The trade unions have demanded that government drop its rigid insistence on a PPP. Government should listen to Londoners. It should hand the Underground over to the Mayor to take responsibility for its financial future.

My own union, ASLEF, and our sister union, RMT, took strike action on the Underground earlier this year. We did this because of our fears for public safety. London Underground's management have gone a long way to meeting our concerns. However, our opposition – and that of the public – to this part of privatisation remains. ★

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