

Joint Statement Issued by 11 Railway Workers' Organisations
and Central Trade Unions

Demand accountability of Ministers and other high authorities for the large number of preventable accidents in the Indian Railways resulting in deaths, injuries and loss of public property!

Stop the violation of all safety norms and procedures by any railway authority for the accidents in the Indian Railways!

Fill all vacant positions in the safety category in Indian Railways!

India is rapidly becoming the railway accident capital of the world. The frequency of accidents is alarming both passengers and rail workers.

Collisions or so-called "accidents" happen in the IR, resulting in deaths, severe injuries and tremendous loss of public property. Even before the real reason is determined, the high authorities quickly denounce the railway workers, including, loco pilots, Station Masters, train managers (earlier known as guards), signaling staff, and so on. Often these people are even dead or injured and cannot defend themselves. Even if alive, they do not have the media power to make their voices heard.

On June 17th, 2024, a goods train collided with Kanchenjunga Express between Rangapani and Chattar Hat stations in West Bengal. The loco pilot (LP) of the goods train, the train manager of the express train and 14 passengers killed and nearly 50 injured. Immediately after the accident, the CEO and Chairperson of the Railway Board blamed the deceased LP of the goods train even before the Commissioner of Railway Safety (CRS) had given its official report!

October 29, 2023. Two passenger trains collide at Vizianagaram, Andhra Pradesh. The Railway Minister claimed that the LP and Assistant Loco Pilot (ALP) were watching a cricket match, which was the reason for the accident! The claim of the Railway Minister was debunked by the Official CRS report which came subsequently.

Should not making such untrue claims and slandering be punishable offenses? The real facts show that so many recent accidents have been caused by systemic failures.

The automatic signalling system in the concerned section had failed when the Kanchenjunga Express met with an accident. This system had been installed in December 2023 by a private company, Siemens Limited, which also had the Annual Maintenance Contract (AMC) for it. As per the Railways' own rules, after a new signalling system is installed, the Chief Loco Inspector (CLI) needs to give training to

Loco Pilots on the New Signalling system including Learning Road (on the field) training. However, there is no uniform procedure across Indian Railways on how this training is to be given. In Southern Railway, a special orientation course is conducted over three days, outside of duty hours wherein the Loco Pilots are given proper training. After this they are issued an orientation certificate.

However in many other zones, the training is limited to the CLI giving instructions during duty hours. As a result, the LPs and ALPs are not totally clear about the new signalling system as well as what is to be done when the signalling system fails. When the Signalling system fails, there are multiple types of forms to be issued, such as T/A912, T/912, T/D 912, T/B409, etc. to guide the LP. ***This shortcut method of training and overwork of all safety category including Station Masters (SMs) and LPs, the SMs are not clear on what is the form to be issued and the LPs are not clear on what is the form to be received!***

Even the highest railway authorities do not themselves know or understand the various complicated rules required for movement of the trains. Immediately after the accident, on June 19th 2024, at a meeting of the top railway officials of the Eastern Railway , which included the General Manager and Principal HODs a circular was issued that “ issuance of T/A 912 will remain suspended.”

But immediately the next day, on 20th June, 2024, they issued a fresh notification that the earlier order suspending T/A-912 “was erroneous and it is withdrawn”!!!

This only shows that if the highest Railway officials are themselves confused about what is to be done when the automatic signalling system becomes defective, what are the the Loco Pilots and Station Masters to do in such situations?

In both accidents June 17th ,2022 involving Kanchenjunga Express and the accident on October 29, 2023 at Vizianagaram, it was lack of proper training about the new automatic signalling system which had been installed which led to the devastating accidents.

This is typical of the way in which many shortcuts are being taken all over the Indian Railways which are the real reason for the increasing number of accidents.

The IR is increasingly being run like a private company that is only interested in profit and not in the safety and comfort of its workers and passengers. Its social obligation of providing affordable and comfortable mode of transport for crores of people has been set aside by curtailing passenger trains and second class coaches. More and more expensive coaches and air-conditioned trains like Vande Bharat are being introduced to increase its revenue. Vacancies are not being filled to reduce expenditure on its workforce. Expenditure on rail track renewal and safety is given low priority. Training is now considered an avoidable expenditure.

The Railways have their own large and modern signalling workshops at many places but are trying to close them down and hand over all the work to private companies. This work includes installing and maintaining the signalling system. Due to outsourcing of signalling work, there are multiple companies involved in installing these signalling systems and each company brings in different technology and hence there exists multiple technologies in different sections further adding to confusion. When the Railway Boards' own workshops install a system they follow standard procedures which ensure more uniformity.

For instance, the Railway Board has been trying to close the signal workshop of the IR at Howrah, Kolkata. Even though Rs. 37.37 crores had been sanctioned for its modernisation, it was not given and implemented. The stiff opposition from the workers' unions has managed to stop the Railway Board in its nefarious plan. It is astonishing that for more than a year the post of Additional Member (Signal), Railway Board, who heads the signal department of the Indian Railways is kept vacant, so that in effect there is no overall in-charge of the signal department, which is a critical safety category.

Large number of vacancies and overwork.

The goods LP involved in the Kanchenjunga accident had already completed three consecutive night duties and when taking rest on the fourth night, he had been rudely woken up at 2 pm and asked to take charge of the goods train. He resisted and finally he came to take the train at 6.30 am.

According to multiple safety committee recommendations, LPs should not be asked to do more than two consecutive night duties, but the Railway officials blatantly ignore these recommendations and force the LPs and ALPs to do more than two consecutive night duties. This deprives them of the needed rest and can also cause accidents as happened.

Just recently in Ambala, Punjab, on June 3rd 2024, both the LP and ALP of a goods train fell into microsleep and collided with another goods train. This LP was doing his 4th consecutive night duty. He had already been forced to do 12 night duties in the month.

High railway officials put extreme pressure on safety category workers, which is another major reason for increasing number of railway accidents. The All India Loco Runnings Staff Association (AILRSA) carried out a militant struggle in Southern Railway, from June 1st 2024 to June 28, 2024, opposing the inadequate periodic rest of 30 hours, duty at a stretch of more than 10 hours, 4 continuous night duties and detention outside Head Quarters for more than 48 hours for LPs and ALPs.

High railway officials put pressure on media not to publish any material criticizing them as well as the unsafe operating practises which are forced on the staff, under threat of withholding of railway advertisements to the concerned media channel.

From all the above it is clear that it is the High Railway Officials who pressurise the lower staff to violate all safety procedures and recommendations, which is the real cause of the increasing number of accidents. However, the railway authorities are quick to blame the lower safety category staff of LPs ALPs SMs, S&T maintainers, pointsmen etc. for all accidents and hand out capital punishment including jail and dismissal from service.

For preventing further rail accidents, we demand

- (i) Hold ministers and other high railway authorities accountable for preventable accidents resulting in deaths, injuries and loss of public property!
- (ii) Stop the violation of all safety norms and procedures by any railway authority and give exemplary punishment if they do so.
- (iii) Fill all vacant positions in the safety category in Indian Railways to make their working conditions stress-free for the safe running of trains.
- (iv) Safety Category Staff to be increased in accordance with creation of New assets and new lines being laid down.

All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU), All India Loco Running Staff Association (AILRSA), All India Pointsmen Association (AIPMA), All India Station Masters' Association (AISMA), All India Railway Track Maintainers Union (AIRTU), All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), Indian Railway Loco Runningmen's Organisation (IRLRO), Indian Railway Signal and Telecom Maintainers Union (IRS&TMU), Kamgar Ekta Committee (KEC), Labour Progressive Front (LPF)