

Centre of Indian Trade Unions

National Convention on Safety in Railways

HKS Surjeet Bhawan, New Delhi

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The recent period has seen a spate of train accidents resulting in the death of hundreds of passengers and scores of railway employees including loco pilots, train managers (previously called guards), track maintainers, contract workers deployed in different jobs in the Railways and others. Thousands of people have been injured with many permanently disabled and losing their livelihoods. Their families are left devastated because of the demise or disability of, for many, the only earning members. A large number of the victims of train accidents are poor workers, particularly the migrant workers who travel by trains, the only affordable means of transport for them, to different places in the country in search of livelihood.

The number of train accidents increased from 21 in 2020-21 to 34 in 2021-22 and 48 in 2022-23. The Railway Minister informed Parliament in 2022 that 469 passengers lost their lives and 1275 were injured in train accidents during 2014-19. In the Bahanaga Bazar train accident in Odisha in June 2023 alone 288 passengers, mostly migrant workers died and more than 1000 people were injured; 14 people died in the accident near Vizianagaram in October the same year; and 10 people were killed in the Kanchenjunga train accident in June 2024; more than 100 were injured in these two accidents. These are only a few examples of major train accidents. It is also reported that 451 track maintainers lost their lives in train related accidents between 2017 and 2022.

Thus, safety in Railways is the concern of the railway employees as well as the common people, particularly of the millions of workers for whom train travel is part of their lives.

It is with this view that the CITU general council meeting held in Kolkata on 9-11 August decided to call a national convention on 'Safety in Railways' and take up a wide campaign on the issue among the passengers, workers and employees across the country. This national convention is being held as per that decision and is meant to create awareness among the common people about the real reasons for the increasing train accidents, mobilise public opinion and develop strong movement demanding safe train travel for the passengers and safe working conditions for the railway employees.

Despite the alarming frequency of the accidents and the huge loss of lives, the BJP government has displayed a total lack of concern to protect the lives of the people and the staff crucial for the train operations. It has failed to take effective measures to prevent train accidents. Instead, it has been blaming the railway employees and taking punitive actions against them.

Why do train accidents happen?

The number of trains and the passenger and goods traffic has increased enormously since 1950-51. Many super fast trains have been introduced and the speed of several trains has been increased. Passenger traffic increased by 16 times between 1950-51 and 2022-23 and goods traffic by nearly 22 times during this period. But the track and route kilometres have only increased by less than 2%. The highly inadequate investment to ease congestion of trains, to renew the over aged assets and for technological improvement, failure to fill up the large number of vacancies including in safety related jobs, rampant contractorisation with deployment of untrained contract workers in these jobs etc are the main reasons for train accidents.

In 2019, Piyush Goyal, the then Railways Minister reportedly said that the government envisaged investment of Rs 50 lakh crore by the year 2030 in Railways for safety of passengers, expansion of network, and increase in freight share. This means an expenditure of more than Rs 4 lakh crore every year during these 12 years. However, in 2019-20, the actual amount spent was only Rs 1.48 lakh crore. This was later abandoned and the Finance Minister announced the 'National Rail Plan' to be executed in thirty years during 2021-2051 with an investment of Rs 38.5 lakh crore, i.e. less than Rs.1.3 lakh crore per year, which is far less than that announced in 2019.

Over Aged Tracks and Signals

In 2014, a White Paper presented by the then Railway Minister stated that 4500 km of track becomes overaged every year and needs renewal. But only 2000-3000 km is renewed every year due to lack of allotment of funds. The arrears of track renewal have now reportedly accumulated to 15000 km. This is one of the major reasons for derailments and multiple accidents.

Safety task force appointed by railways in 2017 reported that signals in 200 stations become overaged every year, but only 100 stations are renewed. As per the Railway Board 4304 point machines of signals are overaged; 3286 kms of signal cables are defective. All these need replacement. Even many newly installed signals are defective. The Indian Railways has now outsourced procurement of signals and point machines instead of acquiring from its signal and telecommunication workshops. Frequent signal failures, even of the automatic signalling system, have become a phenomenon during this period. According to the Railways website there were 55,880 signal failures in Indian railways in 2021-22; however, this information has been removed from the website now. Failure of the automatic signalling system, which was installed by the private company Siemens Limited, was reported to be the reason for the Kanchenjunga Express accident.

The country wide installation of the indigenously developed train protection system 'KAVACH', which was adopted by the Railway Ministry as the National Automatic Train Protection System in 2020, has been dragging on due to inadequate allocation of funds. Track maintainers who inspect and maintain track are prone to being killed by the approaching trains in the absence of a warning system. The

'Approaching train warning system' named 'Rakshak' was approved by the Railway Board in 2018. But till now the necessary funds have not been allotted to deploy it in the entire country. The demand of track maintainers to deploy two men for patrolling is also ignored.

The Rashtriya Railway SamrakshanKosh (National Rail Safety Fund) announced in 2017 envisages investment of Rs 1 lakh crore in five years for rail safety. However, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Railways, in its report for 2022-23 reported that only Rs 74444 crores were invested between 2017-18 and 2021-22 and observed that the noticeable gap in funding and expenditure reflected poorly on the Indian Railways.

All these reflect the lack of seriousness of the Modi government in preventing train accidents and protecting lives.

Human failure

Even before the real reasons are determined, the higher authorities are quick to lay the blame for train accidents on 'human failure' and initiate punitive actions on the concerned employees, loco pilots, track maintainers, station masters, train managers, signalmen etc. This is done even when some of them have lost their lives in these accidents and are not in a position to defend themselves. For example, immediately after the accident involving the Kanchenjunga Express, in which the loco pilot of the goods train and the train manager of the Express train died, the CEO and Chairperson of the Railway Board blamed the deceased loco pilot of the goods train even before the Commissioner of Railway Safety gave his official report. In the case of the accident near Vizianagaram, the railway minister made the outrageous statement that the loco pilot and assistant loco pilot were watching cricket match, which resulted in the accident. This was debunked by the official CRS report.

Signal passing at danger by the loco pilots is one of the major reasons for train accidents. This is mostly due to failure of signals. However, sometimes loco pilots pass into micro sleep due to lack of rest and over work. Lakhs of posts in the Railways, including in the safety related categories are kept vacant since many years. 19000 posts of loco running staff out of the 1.28 lakh sanctioned posts are vacant as per a reply by the railway minister to a question in the Parliament. Obviously, vacancies are not filled to bring down the expenditure on workforce.

As a result, there is huge work pressure on the loco pilots and they are not allowed their rightful leaves including weekly and periodical rest. The Commissioner of Railway Safety acknowledged that, in the case of some accidents, loco pilots were found to have worked for more than 16 hours. Many loco running pilots are today compelled to work for 14 hours a day and do night shifts sometimes continuously for 4-6 days, against the rules. As per statistics provided by railways there were 4239 cases of loco pilots working more than four continuous nights in October 2024 alone. This causes micro sleep with sleep debt and leads to signal passing at danger. The recommendation made by the Railway Labour Tribunal way back in 1969, of 10 hour workday for loco pilots, and the 10 hour rule achieved by the AILRSA after the strike in 1973, remain unimplemented even to this day.

Similarly, track maintenance, signal maintenance, OHE maintenance are also not paid proper attention. Adequate time is not allowed to carry out repairs and maintenance work on the pretext of ensuring punctuality of trains. These often lead to shortcuts and accidents. But it is the employees who are being punished while the apathetic attitude of the Railways towards safety continues.

Impact of Contract System:

The widespread implementation of privatisation, outsourcing, and contractorisation in Indian Railways has significantly affected safety and operational stability. These measures, being carried out in the name of development and cost reduction, prioritise profits for corporate entities at the expense of worker welfare and passenger safety.

According to the Indian Railway Shramik Kalyan Portal, 587968 contract workers were working in the Railways as on 22 July 2022. In fact, the number is much higher, spanning various segments of railway operations, manufacturing, and maintenance. There is gradual replacement of permanent employees with contract workers, undermining job stability and exposing workers to exploitation.

Critical safety-related tasks such as manufacturing and maintenance of rolling stock and engines, installation and upkeep of signals, tracks, and Overhead Equipment (OHE) have been outsourced or handed over to contractors. Many safety related activities, which need training, are now being performed by untrained contract workers, compromising safety and increasing risk of accidents.

Neoliberal policies and privatisation

The negligence of safety in Railways is linked to the neoliberal agenda of the successive governments at the Centre. Neoliberal policies officially initiated by the then Congress government in 1991 and being aggressively pursued by the present Modi led governments are meant to increase corporate wealth by super exploitation of the toiling people and by loot and plunder of the nation. Reduction of public expenditure on people's welfare, handing over public wealth and infrastructure to the private corporates under different nomenclatures – privatisation, disinvestment, National Monetisation Pipeline etc, reduction in permanent employment and increasing precarious employment, attacks on the working conditions and basic rights of workers, weakening trade unions – are all part of the neoliberal policies.

As part of the agenda to curtail expenditure on people's welfare, the government is reneging from its basic responsibility of providing affordable and comfortable transport for the common people of our country. Expenditure on labour is reduced by drastic reduction in the number of permanent workers and employing contract workers, outsourcing etc. In addition, the number of passenger trains is being reduced. The number of general compartments in Express trains is brought down while more expensive trains like Vande Bharat trains and dynamic fares are introduced. Concessions for senior citizens, children, disabled persons etc are removed. With the privatisation/ monetisation of railway stations, trains, tracks etc, goods sheds etc, the burdens on the common people, particularly the poor will

increase manifold. Rail travel, till now an affordable mode of travel for the over 2 crore people who use it every day, will henceforth become out of reach for them. The freight charges and hence the cost of all essential items are bound to increase. The neglect of safety and the government's attempts to hand over Railways to private corporates for their profit generation, will be another severe blow to the lives and living conditions of people who are already reeling under the impact of neoliberal policies on other basic needs like health, education, electricity. Government expenditure on health and education are being drastically cut. Health and education have become avenues to earn super profits for the big corporates, by exploitation of workers and fleecing the people. Electricity too is another essential service which the government is intent to privatise despite opposition from the employees and the people.

Thus, the struggle to ensure safe running of trains, protection of passengers and railway employees from accidents should also include the demand against privatisation of Railways. The common people should be made aware of the attitude of the government and its policies that neglect the safety of the people and the employees to benefit the big corporates and should be mobilised on the demand of safe and affordable rail travel. Privatisation of Railways must be resisted tooth and nail, unitedly by the people with the working class in the front. CITU has to play an important role in this struggle.

In addition, the heinous attempts of the Hindutva communal forces to utilise even train accidents create communal divide by spreading falsehoods and lies were displayed on the occasion of the Bahanaga Bazar accident near Balasore. Such machinations to divert the attention of the people from the real causes of accidents are part of their attempts to divert people's attention from the disastrous impact of neoliberal policies on the lives and livelihoods of the people and weaken their united struggles. The working class and the people must be vigilant against these and strengthen their united struggles.

This convention calls upon all CITU cadres and members to take up an extensive campaign among the working class and the common people demanding the government to-

- Ensure safety of Railway passengers
- Safe working conditions for Railway employees
- Stop privatisation of Indian Railways in any form
- Increase passenger trains and sleeper class and general compartments in Express trains
- Improve amenities in trains
- Allocate necessary funds for expansion and safety, and
- Fill up all vacant posts in Railways

This convention calls upon all CITU committees to popularise these demands by organising

- State level conventions with effective preparations on this issue during 15 January 2025 to 15 February 2025, followed by

- District/ major railway station/ Railway Division level conventions to be completed by the end of March 2025, followed by
- Demonstrations in front of Railway stations all over the country up to 10 April 2025 accompanied by leaflet distribution and signature collections on a memorandum to the Prime Minister
- Leaflet distribution and signature campaign to continue up to end of April 2025

This convention calls for development of a strong joint movement to protect people's right to safe and affordable travel and opposing privatisation of Indian Railways and calls upon all sections of the people to join this campaign