

Japanese train crash linked to employee stress

By Dragan Stankovich
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A commuter train jumped the tracks in western Japan on April 25 and crashed into an apartment complex, killing 107 people and injuring more than 450 others in the deadliest rail accident in the country in 40 years.

The crash happened near Amagasaki, about 410 kilometres west of Tokyo, at 9:18 a.m. The seven-car commuter train was carrying 580 passengers when it derailed on a curving section of track, and rammed into a nine-storey apartment complex. Two of the five derailed cars were flattened against the wall of the building.

The accident caused considerable shock in Japan. The rail system is widely viewed as safe and efficient and there have been few disasters. The most serious was in November 1963, when a collision between three trains killed 161 people in Tsurumi, outside Tokyo. An accident killed 42 people in April 1991 in Shigaraki. In March 2000, five people were killed and 33 were injured when a Tokyo subway train hit a derailed train. An earthquake in 2004 caused a bullet train to derail—the first since the high speed trains went into service 40 years ago—but there was no loss of life.

The tragedy last month has been blamed on the 23-year-old driver, Ryujiro Takami. Takami overshot the stop at the last station before the crash and had fallen 90 seconds behind schedule. It appears he was trying to make up time. The data recorder recovered at the crash site showed that the train was traveling 108 kilometres per hour when it derailed, on a section of track that had a 70-kilometre per hour speed limit. The young driver's body was found with his hand gripping the emergency brake.

Kazuhiko Nagase, a Kanazawa Institute of Technology professor and train expert, said: "If the train hadn't hit anything before derailing ... the train was probably speeding. For the train to flip, it had to be travelling at a high speed."

The circumstances surrounding the accident raise a

series of questions about the impact of the privatisation of the Japanese rail system and the subordination of public transport to the pursuit of profit.

Japan's National Railway was government-run for 115 years until 1987, when it was privatised and sold off to six companies. One of the firms, Japan Railways West, has turned the Fukuchiyama Line, where the derailment took place, into one of the most profitable parts of the system by running more trains and increasing train speeds.

Drivers and railway staff work under intense stress to keep to the tight timetables. There is no government test for train drivers as there is for airline pilots and ships captains. Training is determined solely by the company. Takami had only received his train operator's licence in May 2004. One month later, he overran a station and was punished for the mistake.

The rail union directly blamed Takami's fear of being punished again for the speed at which he was driving the train on April 25. Japan Federation of Railway Workers vice president Osamu Yomono said: "The accident is a result of JR West's ... high-pressure management, which uses terror to force its employees to follow orders."

Yomono explained that drivers who fail to meet schedules are surrounded by their superiors and berated as punishment and forced to write "meaningless reports". The union said Takami had been put through such treatment for 13 days in 2004. The company confirmed that Takami had been punished.

The practice of punishing employees for being late has led to other tragedies. In 2001, Masaki Hattori, who also worked for Japan Railways West, hanged himself in his home after being penalised for an unscheduled 60-second stop to conduct routine safety checks. He had 20 years experience and an unblemished record. According to his family, who unsuccessfully sued Japan Railway West for damages, Masaki Hattori

killed himself because of the humiliation of re-education.

Drivers undergoing re-education have their pay docked and are banned from drinking tea, talking to one another, or going to the lavatory without permission. They have to write up to eight reports a day on why they made the mistake and how they inconvenienced the passengers. Drivers have been locked in a small room and berated by management. The humiliation can go on for months. One driver was made to stand on a platform in his uniform, greeting trains as they arrived and wishing the drivers a safe journey.

Soon after Masaki Hattori's suicide, an official of Japan Railways West's trade union said eight company workers had killed themselves in the past two years, half of them following company re-education.

Investigators and experts have highlighted several other factors that may have contributed to the accident and which stem from cost-saving measures by the railway's private operators.

In the past, railway carriages were assembled from heavy steel, which worked to give them more stability. Newer carriages, however, are being made from less costly, lightweight stainless steel. Hiroshi Kubota, an expert who once worked for the National Railways, told the *Asahi Shimbun* on May 4: "Past railway cars made of steel were more stable at curves. The derailed train had heavy air conditioning systems atop the roof of the cars that are just as heavy as the bottom frames of the cars. That probably unbalanced the cars and made them prone to topple."

Experts have also pointed out that the automatic braking system on the line where the accident happened is among the oldest in Japan. The system is supposed to stop trains at signs of trouble without requiring a driver to take emergency action. Reports say the older system is less effective in halting trains travelling at high speeds.

What is clear is that the intense pressure on staff, combined with the lack of investment in updating safety systems and cost-cutting in the way trains are manufactured, contributed to the derailment on April 25. Unless these factors are addressed, the potential exists for future accidents.

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