

Channel 4 programme highlights crisis conditions on London Underground

By Paul Bond
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Confessions from the Underground, recently aired on Channel 4, made for striking viewing. Actors relayed comments and thoughts documented from workers across London Underground. They were unanimous in portraying a system in crisis, where passenger levels are rising and staff levels are falling. The programme offered a damning indictment of the already heavily privatised Tube system, showing staff concerns that safety regulations are being pushed to the limit in order to keep the network running. Workers spoke of an unrelenting pressure on them to keep the system open.

It is a measure of the programme's success in giving a voice to those working on the Tube that London Underground management responded immediately by denouncing it as "inaccurate".

Dramatising the actual words of participants has proved a valuable way of dealing with recent political events. Plays based on inquiries and inquests have emerged as a means of tackling contentious and significant political questions. Here the cast played out the comments of Tube workers in a straightforward documentary style.

In itself this was revealing. As the programme made clear from the outset, Tube workers are concerned that they will lose their jobs if they speak out publicly. The level of anonymity provided here was necessary to safeguard against this.

The response of London Underground management only served to validate the workers' fear over retaliation. Managing Director Mike Brown criticised the filmmakers for not putting questions to him directly on camera. Brown said they had been offered "numerous opportunities to put these claims to me directly", but they had "declined, preferring to base their programme on claims that they were either unwilling or simply unable to substantiate".

Workers rejected Brown's comment that staff "will simply not recognise the inaccurate picture painted by this film". One station supervisor, commenting anonymously, wrote "I can say hand on heart that the comments aired are true and represent the majority of our opinions on the Underground". The correspondent went on to say that some of Brown's claims were "blatant untruths".

Workers spoke of rising tensions between staff and passengers. Tube travel is becoming ever more expensive, and there was sympathy for passengers' hopes and expectations of seeing improved service for their money. The tensions have been further exacerbated by the slashing of staffing levels. Over the last year some 800 jobs have been cut across the Tube.

This has resulted in rising stress levels for workers. Workers on the gateline (the ticket barriers) spoke of the overwhelming volumes of passengers at peak times. Workers portrayed in the film were acutely conscious of the dangers of overcrowding on the platforms under this pressure of numbers.

All of the workers spoke quite movingly of the regular tragedies on the Tube. Many of the press reports of the programme focused on the revelation that the body of someone who had jumped under a train at Stratford had been temporarily stored in cleaning bins in the absence of anywhere else to put it. Workers on the programme cited this as evidence of how those using the Tube are dehumanised and degraded.

One member of station staff, "Patricia", spoke of the twin pressures she faced from rising passenger levels on the one hand and demands for performance coming from management on the other. She spoke quite bluntly of her expectation of "a crash situation" as the inevitable result of present conditions.

"Dan", a controller, said he was concerned that the

pressure to speed up the services had led to safety being jeopardised. The one specific instance examined in the programme related to an unexplained cloud of dust that caused Charing Cross station to be closed. When no fire was found the station was reopened, although it was still not known if the dust was toxic, nor was its source known. A recurrence led to the station being closed within hours.

Perhaps the most remarkable commentaries on safety came from engineers and track inspectors. An engineer described the cramped and dirty conditions in which he has to work, often contending with the swarms of mice that infest the network.

A track maintenance inspector explained how safety controls are continually being stretched. Big maintenance jobs are still being done, he said, but minor repairs are not. Reduced staffing levels have meant fewer safety patrols, and there are proposals to reduce regular patrols from twice a week to once. He spoke of the growth of TANC (Temporary Approval Non-Compliance) notices, which meant management could acknowledge a problem and leave the track open without it being repaired. Experienced drivers slow down over stretches of track they know to have problems.

As an exposé both of the conditions within an industry, and of workers' own recognitions of them, the programme was exemplary. It did not, however, pursue any deeper consideration of the reasons for these conditions. A driver spoke of the Tube being subjected to "death by a thousand cuts". This is true enough, but that rests on a deeper problem.

The situation on the Tube stems from running it for profit. Privatisation drives have escalated the safety crisis, just as they did on the national rail network. Predatory operating companies have been courted by all of the major parties. The Labour Party proposed the massively unpopular Public-Private Partnership (PPP) to hand sections of the network over to private companies. When this proved politically awkward they were rescued by former (and subsequent) mayor Ken Livingstone.

Livingstone, supported by the ex-lefts and the unions, campaigned as an opponent of privatisation. In fact his objection was only to PPP: in its place he proposed only a different form of private financing. He remained committed to serving the needs of the City of London.

When Metronet, which won two of the three PPP contracts, later went into administration, it was the TfL under Livingstone that guaranteed its debts.

With the Mayoral election looming the question of London's transport infrastructure is again taking centre stage. The eloquent voices heard on *Confessions from the Underground* are witness to the failures of all of those organisations that remain committed to the profit system. What is required is the socialist reorganisation of society so as to deliver a transport system that is a public utility, not a source of corporate gain.

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