

Seven die and many injured after tram derailment in London

By Robert Stevens
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Seven people were killed and more than 50 injured Wednesday morning after a crowded tram derailed in Croydon, south London. The tram, operated by Tramlink, overturned at 6:13 a.m. near the Sandilands stop.

Eight people remain in a severe or life threatening condition in two local hospitals. More than 100 emergency workers attended the scene and worked for six hours to free injured commuters.

The Croydon disaster is the worst rail incident in the UK since 10 people died in the Great Heck crash between two trains in Yorkshire in 2001.

The busy two-car tram, travelling from New Addington to Wimbledon, was mainly filled with commuters. In torrential rain conditions, the tram flipped on its side on a sharp, left-hand curve after coming out of the last of three tunnels and down a steep slope towards the bend. Survivors said that upon derailing, the tram slid for between eight and 10 seconds before coming to a halt.

Passengers reported that the tram sped up when coming down the slope instead of slowing to within the 12 mph limit required on that section of the track. One of the passengers, Martin Bamford, said, “When we were coming through the tunnel we were going at some speed and the tram was speeding up more and more. We were coming out of the tunnel and we hit the bend way too fast and the tram flipped.”

Tramlink is run by giant transnational FirstGroup, which operates the service under a concession with Transport for London. Tramlink is the only tram system operating in the capital and carries 27 million passengers a year.

Following the rescue operation, a 42-year-old driver was arrested on suspicion of manslaughter by British Transport Police and taken into custody. Late

Wednesday evening he was freed on conditional police bail. On Thursday, British Transport Police said he was released until May while investigations continue. Asst. Chief Constable Robin Smith said it was investigating whether the driver fell asleep, alongside “a number of factors.”

Many questions remained unanswered about the disaster, including why the driver was immediately arrested while investigations as to its cause were still underway. One passenger, Martin Bamford, told the media that after the crash he asked the driver if he was OK. Bamford said the driver replied, “Yeah.” Bamford recalled, “I said to him, ‘What happened?’ He said he thinks he blacked out.”

Given these comments, there are obviously issues around the health of the driver that need to be established. This is particularly significant following the fatalities that occurred in Glasgow in December 2014, when a bin lorry collided with pedestrians in the city centre. Six people were killed and 15 injured. The driver of the local authority-owned vehicle, Harry Clarke, said he had passed out at the wheel, was unconscious and had no memory of the crash. Following an investigation, which did not involve Clarke giving a police statement, Clarke was not prosecuted.

Surviving passengers said the tram was travelling at anywhere between 40 mph and 70 mph when the train emerged from the tunnel. The Bombardier CR4000 tram weighs around 36 tonnes, is 100 feet long, 10 feet high and 8 feet wide. But the Office of Rail and Road confirmed that UK trams are not fitted with any safety protection systems that apply the brakes automatically if they are going too fast.

The *Financial Times* noted, “Tram systems typically use far less sophisticated signalling than heavy rail

systems and tend to lack the mechanisms that limit speed in dangerous locations such as sharp curves.” The Croydon tram emerged from the tunnel and travelled into such a sharp curve.

Tramlink opened in 2000 and uses a combination of on-street and segregated running for the 17 miles of track. The track used by the tram where the derailment took place is old heavy railway line. From known facts, the state of the track has not yet been established. Transport for London is responsible for tram frequency, overall performance, maintenance and improvement work.

In February 2012, a tram carrying 100 passengers also derailed on the same section of line at Croydon, about half a mile away. No one was hurt. It was established that the main cause of the incident was that a track circuit failed to respond to an approaching tram and locked the points to prevent movement. A Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB) investigation found the track circuit was not correctly adjusted and the railhead may have been contaminated with silt. The RAIB also found that system integration was inadequate.

The fatalities in Croydon are the first on any UK light rail system since tram systems were revived in several UK cities in the 1990s. These include Nottingham, Sheffield, Manchester and Edinburgh. The last death of a passenger in a tram was in 1959, after a tram caught fire in Shettleston Road, Glasgow, following a collision with a lorry. Two women passengers and the driver died.

However, a number of accidents, including derailments have occurred at regular intervals with more than 100 in the year to March alone. The vast majority of the accidents, 102, involved collisions with road vehicles.

Cost cutting cannot be ruled out as a factor in the disaster. London Tramlink drivers have faced ongoing attacks on their pay and conditions at the hands of FirstGroup. Last year FirstGroup slashed drivers’ pension benefits, resulting in them having to pay up to £120 per month more out of their salaries into their pension fund.

Earlier this year drivers voted to strike, by a 100 percent majority on an 82 percent turnout, to demand pay parity with train drivers. A two-day strike was set for June in response to a company pay offer of 2.6

percent. Finn Brennan, the London Underground union organiser of the drivers’ trade union Aslef, said at the time, “The current pay offer of 2.6 percent doesn’t make up for the cuts FirstGroup has made to pensions and means staff will continue to earn much less than they deserve.” Brennan added, “Last year they saw their pension benefits drastically cut as FirstGroup milked its staff to increase its profits.”

Just days before the strike, Aslef called off the proposed action, claiming FirstGroup had made a “much improved offer.”

FirstGroup originated in the deregulation of bus services in the UK in 1986, and operates transport services in Ireland, Canada and the United States. In June, it reported global revenues of £5.2 billion and a pre-tax profit rise of 7 percent to £114 million. In 2014, FirstGroup chief executive Tim O’Toole had his salary doubled to £2,000,000 per annum.

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