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ITF International Transport Workers' Federation
RMT National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Worker

Object: some observations about the Santiago train disaster

Dear Sirs,

I'm the national representative of CAT, an Italian Union of railway workers.

I'm writing you to express some reflections concerning what happened that terrible evening near Santiago de Compostela.

In the era of high-speed trains and technology, we witnessed to a shocking train accident, that caused the death of 79 passengers and the wounding of 150 people.

We don't want to judge this tragedy in respect of all victims, but we'd like to express some considerations.

From the newspapers, we know the first datas from the black boxes. They demonstrate that the train driver responded to a phone call from the rail company, on his professional telephone, two minutes before the crash took place. He activated the brake 250 mts before the crash point, while the train was travelling at 184 km/h; 50 mts after this first brake, he activated the emergency brake, but the train left the tracks, while travelling at 153km/h. On that bend the speed limit was 80km/h.

By this report, the tragedy's fault could be the too high speed of the train.

The law must now take its course and discover all real aspects and causes of the event.

There's the risk that only the driver will be blamed for all: he already admitted his responsibilities immediately after the crash.

As a matter of fact, the train driver is the last ring of railway chain: everyday he experiences the risk of make a mistake and he knows very well his jobs and his responsibilities.

We think that the inspectors must discover also the deeper responsibilities, because the investigation can't stop at the easiest and most obvious solution.

Inspectors must analyze driver's job conditions, his shifts, his job seniority; and news agencies should avoid to emphasize only what he wrote on his facebook page.

In this economical crisis, job conditions are getting worse, especially in countries such as Spain or Italy.

The social reforms, put into practice by governments and companies, often with the agreement of Trade Unions, are producing a too high price: this accident is the son of these new regulations.

In Italy there are some technological systems, that could have been able to avoid this tragedy: in high-speed lines there's the ERTMS system, on the other ones the SCMT system (it means Control Train Gear System), that inform train driver if he would exceed the speed-limit: if he doesn't activate the brake, the train automatically stops.



In some Spanish lines, on the contrary, there's the ALFA system, that doesn't control the speed-limits and brakes the train automatically, only if it exceeds the 200 km/h. This second system was activated on the crash line.

We have to call attention to the fact that technology must be only an instrument for the man: human factor is essential and it is necessary to invest on it.

In Italy, safety systems were taken only after years of historical battles by the train drivers, such as the one against the "dead-man system": a mechanism that forces the driver to push a foot-board every 15-20 seconds. If he doesn't do it, the train automatically stops.

This system should have taken the place of the second driver, guaranteeing the train safety.

Some train drivers fought against this system, with the assistance of some hospitals. They won and other safety systems (such as ERTMS and SCMT) were designed.

The "dead-man system" is still in practice in Spain: the train on Santiago was driven by only one train driver, without any assistance except his right minds.

Therefore, the real cause of this tragedy could be the passage from two drivers to one driver, without any assistance in case of danger.

The choice to reduce the number of workers, and the increase of duties and responsibilities, are the results of an economical logic, that is becoming too dangerous for people.

What happened in Santiago won't never be forgotten.

We have strong hopes that law will discover the deeper responsibilities of this tragedy.

Yours faithfully

f. CAT

Antonino Catalano



Rome, 2013-08-12