

Will Rail Breakdown Be Blair's Waterloo?

by Alan Clayton

The British government of Prime Minister Tony Blair is going from crisis to crisis, which on occasions diverts the world's attention even from the great international Florida pantomime. Blair succeeded in postponing the fuel crisis by a very British mixture of carrot and stick, of bribe and threat. In mid-November, Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown announced "substantial increases" in state retirement pensions. This was in addition to the "increase" of one dollar a week that he had given six months earlier. Despite Brown's invitation to pensioners "to share in the increasing prosperity of Britain," pensions on the island remain among the lowest in Europe, and indeed are only marginally ahead of some formerly communist East European countries, such as Romania.

Brown indicated that even these limited pensions could only be financed if fuel taxes were allowed to remain at punitive levels, and this has an immediate effect on the trucking firms which were organizing direct action against fuel supply depots. However, just to make sure that there were no problems with truckers in the short term, all police and army leave was cancelled. In addition, some newspapers reported that Special Branch had penetrated a number of the truckers organizations.

Special Branch is the political section of the British police, and it works in close cooperation with MI5 in a range of penetration and control operations throughout the island. It was founded in 1888 under the name of Special Irish Branch, in order to halt the increasing Irish moves toward self-determination, and it is widely believed that "the Branch" played a key role in operating the loyalist death squads which were active in Northern Ireland throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s. Special Branch has both an intelligence gathering and *agent provocateur* role, both gathering information and creating disinformation. In the event, leading activists in the trucker action groups found police cars alongside their trucks while driving on motorways, with video cameras openly aimed at them.

Special Branch currently has wide-ranging powers of arrest and detention under the 1988 Prevention of Terrorism Act, a "temporary" measure which is a gross violation of human rights—by and large it is Special Branch which decides what is terrorism and what is not. It is a substantial check on radical political activism. It certainly had the desired effect of unnerving many trucking companies and encouraging

them to withdraw from the campaign, out of sheer apprehension and even fear.

British Rail: Unparalleled Chaos

Much more difficult to manage for Blair and the oligarchical families and structures which support him, is the escalating crisis on the railways. It beggars the imagination that such unparalleled chaos could be taking place in what purports to be a modern industrialized nation; indeed, recent expert opinion suggests that the rail infrastructure will take at least 20 years to return to even mid-20th-Century standards.

Blair has attempted to protect his position in this escalating crisis by removing the Chief Executive of Railtrack, the City of London whiz kid Gerald Corbett, a man who made no secret of the fact that stockholder value took precedence over public safety. Corbett was dispatched with a golden handshake, which some press reports suggested was in the region of a million dollars, but he has simply been replaced by another City whiz kid, Steve Marshall, who has already made some less overt, but quite unapologetic comments about the priority of stockholder value. Indeed, one of his first actions was to increase company dividends by 5%, a quite unbelievable act, given the near collapse of the island's rail infrastructure and the decrease in passengers of an incredible 50%, as public confidence in rail safety collapses totally.

Even in the short time that Marshall has been in charge, there have been some dangerous "near-miss" situations. On Nov. 26, the London to Glasgow express was derailed 15 miles outside Glasgow, due to "track spread," that is, the rails have become loosened from the track bed and widen further than the gauge of the train's bogeys. This train had 400 passengers on board, and was only travelling at a very slow speed, as it was already on a diversion, due to the main line being in a state of decay. Had it been travelling at full speed, the death toll could have been enormous, although a train travelling at full speed in Britain is becoming an increasing rarity. Even the word "express" has had derision poured on it by the media, as some of these "express" trains very often now have longer journey times than the mid-19th-Century pioneering railways. Railtrack "forgot" to tell the emergency services about the wreck, and the first that both fire and police services knew about the event, was when reporters telephoned them to ask about casualties. On Nov. 27, a late-night London to Nottingham "express" disappeared for around five hours, with nobody quite sure of its exact location.

It would be difficult to describe the climate of apprehension, cynicism, and downright fear that now pervades the island with regard to the railways, with widespread belief that "the big one," with hundreds of deaths, it yet to come. It may be the event that in the end brings Blair down, but it is a sad indictment of the collapsing British state, that things have to happen in that way, because whatever can be said of American antics in Florida, they at least seem able to get through a crisis without widespread loss of human life.