
MPs attack Government rail plans

MAY 3, 2012

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(UKPA) – 3 days ago

More than 100 MPs have signed a Commons motion criticising Government proposals for the future of railways, warning of worsening services, higher fares and job cuts.

An Early Day Motion (EDM) tabled by Labour MP John McDonnell is attracting cross-party support in the UK, amid fresh anger at the amount of investment being made in the railways, while fares "go through the roof".

The EDM warns that the Government's plans "will worsen passenger services through the loss of thousands of frontline workers from trains, stations, ticket offices, safety-critical infrastructure and operational roles", and "will result in higher fares, cuts in services and more crowded trains".

The MPs who have signed the EDM have urged the Government to run the railway as a "public service" with "affordable fares and proper staffing levels".

Research by the TUC said that while fare prices are rising, investment by train operating companies in the railway network has been halved over the last five years. There has been an 80% reduction in investment in stations, while there has been more than twice as much spent on back office functions such as IT and web costs, said the TUC.

There has also been a 15% reduction in private investment in new rolling stock and a 100% reduction in funds spent on track and signals, it was claimed.

TUC deputy general secretary Frances O'Grady said: "MPs from across the political spectrum are voicing the concerns of thousands of their constituents who feel ripped off by private train operators who inflict heavy fare rises while cutting staff on trains and stations and keeping investment in decent facilities on trains and stations to a minimum. These same companies are now being rewarded by the Government with longer franchises and more freedom to maximise profits while cutting staff and closing ticket offices, showing exactly where ministers' priorities

lie - not with the passenger but with the executives and shareholders of the train operating companies."

Bob Crow, leader of the Rail Maritime and Transport union, said: "The scandal of rail privatisation, which has bled billions in private profit out of our transport system for the last two decades, not only continues but is set to worsen under the plans laid out in the Government's McNulty Rail Review. This Government has learnt nothing from the tragedies of the past and is allowing the profiteers to bleed the railways of desperately needed investment while creating the perfect conditions for another Hatfield or Potters Bar. It is a national disgrace."

Manuel Cortes, leader of the Transport Salaried Staffs Association, said: "UK rail has long been a cash merry-go-round in which the passenger consistently gets taken for a ride. Now passengers are being told that they are expected to stand for further fare increases, fewer trains which will be more overcrowded and fewer staff delivering a less safe and more confusing environment in and around stations. It is a national disgrace designed to benefit shareholders and allow Government to deny responsibility." Mick Whelan, leader of the drivers' union Aslef, said: "A fragmented railway run in small sections by competing interests is necessarily expensive and wasteful."

Rail minister Theresa Villiers said: "Our plans are to reduce the cost of running the railway by £3.5 billion per annum by 2019. If we can do this, we can reduce the burden on taxpayers and put an end to the era of above-inflation increases in average regulated fares. The plans place the passenger at the heart of everything the rail network is about. We want to see Britain's railways continue to prosper and we have made clear our commitment to them. To address crowding, cut journey times and improve the passenger experience we are funding thousands of new carriages across the country, electrifying swathes of the rail network and redeveloping many of our great railway stations."

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