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THE  TIMES

Anger from rail passengers as fares soar by up to 9.1%



Fares and season tickets on the busiest routes into London will be 58% higher than where they were in 2000 FA

Robert Lea Industrial Editor
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There was widespread condemnation of the Government and the rail industry yesterday after it was confirmed that the most expensive train fares on the network are yet again to increase by more than the rate of inflation.

Prices for regulated fares — covering peak-time commuting season-ticket holders — are to rise by 4.1 per cent from January under the Department for Transport formula of 1 per cent over the July retail price index rate of inflation. Unregulated fares could increase by as much as 9.1 per cent according to estimates.

The latest price rise will, according to official figures, mean that fares and season tickets on the busiest routes into London, which account for a large proportion of train usage, will be 58 per cent higher than where they were in 2000. Stripping out inflation, fares are nearly 20 per cent higher in real terms.

Passengers, business leaders and trade unions all attacked the latest rises and there were protests at about 50 railway stations round the country.

Passenger Focus, the consumer watchdog, said that train users were weary of the constant fare increases, but should not be diverted from demanding greater rail investment and the reform of arcane fare structures.

“It is crucial that in return for this rise, more trains arrive on time, investment in future improvements continues and the basic promises the industry make are delivered,” said David Sidebottom, of the watchdog.

“The way that train companies are allowed so much flexibility to set fares on individual routes is unfair. Train companies cannot explain to an individual passenger why their fare has gone up by a certain amount. That is not transparent or fair.”

The Campaign for Better Transport said that rail fares had increased nearly twice as fast as incomes since 2007. “Getting to work is now the biggest single monthly outgoing for many commuters — more than food, more than housing,” said Stephen Joseph, its chief executive. “One of the surest ways of stamping on any green shoots of recovery is to price people off the trains and out of the job market.”

Caroline Lucas, the Green Party MP, was protesting in Brighton, outside her local station, which serves one of the busiest commuter routes into the capital. She said: “We have to put up with unreliable services, overcrowding and some of the highest fares in Europe. Passengers and taxpayers alike are being ripped off.”

Southern Railway’s season ticket from Brighton to London is to rise to £4,355 in January, £800 or nearly 22 per cent more than commuters were paying four years ago. On other commuter routes, tickets from the likes of Deal, Canterbury and Ramsgate will

top £5,000 for the first time. The half-hour commute between Reading and London on First Great Western will go above £4,000 a year for the first time.

The Institute of Directors accused the train companies of living in a time warp for failing to tailor fares to commuters' needs. "The train operators must look at major reforms to bring their services into line with modern living and working practices," said Corin Taylor, the IoD's senior economist.

Unite, the country's largest trade union, called for a cap on rail fares and said that public opinion was still in favour of renationalising the railways.

"Ordinary people are being engulfed by a cost-of-living crisis," said Len McCluskey, the general secretary of Unite. "The Government is woefully out of touch with the struggles of working people who face being priced off the railway and out of the jobs market."

The train companies said that the fare rises were not their fault. "The Government determines how the average season ticket price rise is set each year," said Michael Roberts, of the Association of Train Operating Companies.

Patrick McLoughlin, the Transport Secretary, said: "The taxpayer is contributing a lot and the passenger has to make his contribution."

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