

# Rail operators profit from commuter misery

**R**AIL PASSENGERS face a miserable start to the New Year as a result of massive price hikes imposed by the privately run train operating companies (TOCs).

Dave Carr

The price rises average 6.2% for unregulated fares with mainline season ticket holders having to fork out an extra 13%, way above the current inflation rate.

An annual season ticket between Leicester and Coventry, for example, will now cost £2,472, while a season ticket between Peterborough and London has risen to a staggering £5,320 (ie more than half a year's minimum wage). Tube and bus passengers in London face a 6.8% increase from 1 January.

Passengers will face yet more misery in January 2012 when a higher inflation forecast coupled to a 3% fare hike will come in across the rail network.

These increases will price people off the railways and make it prohibitively expensive for many to commute to work in the cities. This will add to road congestion and increase carbon dioxide emissions in the atmosphere.

Not that road transport is much of a cheaper alternative, with fuel duty and VAT tax rises on petrol and diesel applying from the start of 2011 and another increase in fuel duty expected in April.

Chief executive of the Associa-



Delays, rip-off fares and overcrowding - the rail passengers' lot under privatisation.

photo Paul Mattsson

tion of TOCs, Michael Roberts, disingenuously argued that the price increases were part of a government policy to make rail passengers pay a greater share than taxpayers - as if passengers don't pay taxes!

What Roberts is attempting to conceal, badly, is the huge £1 billion a year subsidy the privately run TOCs receive in order to maintain their profits and reward shareholders.

Since British Rail was denational-

ised by the Tory government under John Major in 1993 the rail passenger system has been in chaos. Fatal safety failures, massive overcrowding of trains, expensive and constantly rising fares, and billions in public subsidies while underinvesting in infrastructure, have characterised the privatised railways.

Such has been the disastrous impact of privatisation on the rail network, that in 2001 the Labour government was forced to

part-renationalise the failed rail infrastructure company Railtrack by creating Network Rail. However, this measure has simply resulted in the public paying for new investment in the industry while the TOCs continue to cream the profits.

This parasitic relationship between the state and private rail companies must be ended through the wholesale renationalisation of the rail system as part of an overall national transport plan.

## Northern Ireland water crisis

### Privatisation agenda wrecks service utility

**A** PROTEST was held outside Northern Ireland Water in Belfast on Monday 3 January to demand emergency action to guarantee the immediate reconnection of water to homes.

Protest organisers Pat Lawlor and Paddy Meehan of the Socialist Party, Northern Ireland, explained: "40,000 homes have been without water, some now for weeks. NI Water bosses have completely failed to provide what is a fundamental service. There are serious health risks emerging since people cannot wash themselves nor heat their homes. The scenes of streams of people with buckets collecting water from the River Lagan in Belfast are disgraceful.

"This crisis has occurred as a result of the agenda to privatise the water service. NI Water was designed to become a privately-owned company. Two thirds of water staff were laid off and private companies have been running much of our water service

for many years now. These companies' priorities are to make profits rather than providing a service to meet people's needs. NI Water should be scrapped and the service should be brought entirely back into the public service. Private companies should be removed from the water service and staff should be re-employed to deal with the wreckage NI Water bosses have caused.

"Ultimately, responsibility for this crisis lies with the Assembly Executive and the Minister for Regional Development. They have stood by and allowed this crisis to happen.

"It is shameful that some elements in the media and politicians have used this crisis to push the agenda of water charges while so many people are in distress. They have no support for water charges. We already pay for water [through council charges] and with domestic rates due to rise by 8% over the next four years we will be paying even more for water."

## NHS cutbacks - health bosses and government to blame

**A** 'FINAL consultation' meeting of the inner and outer north east London primary care trusts on 15 December decided to close the Accident and Emergency department at the King George hospital in Goodmayes, east London.

Simon Carter,  
east London Socialist Party

This decision was made against the backdrop of billions of pounds of "efficiency savings", ie cuts, in the National Health Service (NHS) by the coalition government. It further undermines the claim by David Cameron that the NHS will be protected by the government.

The closure of the King George A&E by 2013 (and also the closure of maternity services by 2012) will be a disaster in terms of healthcare provision across four London boroughs and parts of Essex. It will leave one million people with only two hospitals that can provide critical care for patients.

Indeed, at the December PCT meeting an ambulance driver pointed out that even before any closure decision the King George A&E was already being run down, with no admissions of children. However, patients taken by ambulance to the A&E at Queen's Hospital in Romford (several miles away) had been referred back to King George because critical care facilities at Queen's were overstretched.

The PCTs have attempted to reassure the public that a 24-hour 'urgent care' facility will be installed on the King George Hospital site. However, everyone knows that a 'poly-clinic' (a minor injuries treatment centre) cannot serve as a substitute for an emergency department.

In reality, the closure decision is a cynical cost cutting measure dressed up as a clinical reorganisation.

It is also common knowledge that the cost of servicing the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contract, through which Queen's Hospital was built, has left the health trust deep in debt.

The local Tory and Labour MPs in Ilford and the Tory-Lib Dem run Redbridge council are opposed to closure - not because they oppose the market-oriented policies of the previous Labour and present Tory-Lib Dem governments - but because of political 'nimbysism' ie don't close the A&E department in our backyard.

The Socialist Party has for the last four years (the closure of the A&E has been threatened twice before under the last Labour government) been campaigning in the local community against closure.

As part of the campaign the Socialist Party has demanded an end to privatisation policies such as PFI schemes which have wrecked the NHS, and instead called for a publicly owned, fully-funded and democratically run health service. The fight goes on.

## Private ownership, public pollution

**A** STUDY in the USA has found that tap water in 31 out of 35 major cities contains exceedingly high levels of chromium 6 - a highly toxic and carcinogenic substance associated with waste contamination from the heavy metals industry.

Water pumped from Lake Michigan which supplies seven million people in Chicago, for example, was found to contain three times the safety limit proposed last year by California government officials.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) by contrast doesn't require US cities to test for the pollutant, nor does the EPA specifically limit its levels in tap water under the agency's existing rules passed back in 1992. The EPA only limits total chromium content, conveniently for capitalist heavy industries which produce chromium 6 waste as a by-product, which also includes chromium 3 - an essential nutrient for humans.

The dangers of chromium 6 were highlighted in the 2000 film Erin Brockovich starring Julia Roberts. The film centred on the town of Hinkley north of Los Angeles whose residents, led by the real Erin Brockovich, fought a legal battle against the Pacific Gas and Electric company after the local water supply was contaminated by industrial waste containing chromium 6.



The town once again made the headlines in November 2010 when the underground plume of chromium 6 was found to be spreading, and thereby continuing to pollute the town's water supply.

It is technically possible to eliminate chromium 6 and other industrial and agricultural pollutants from drinking water if the water companies invested in clean-up processes, something that is unlikely to happen without tough regulation. But tough regulation doesn't appear to be part of the remit of the EPA.

Also, it is vital that capitalist industry is prevented from allowing polluting and toxic run-offs into rivers and aquifers in the first place. But once again the problem here is not technical but one of private ownership of the means of production. Clearly only socialist nationalisation of major industry and the water utilities can prevent long-term damage to human health.