

King's Cross tragedy chars 'Thatcherism'

by Mark Burdman

During rush hour on Nov. 18, at London's busiest Underground station, King's Cross, the worst fire in the history of the London subway system killed at least 30 people, and left scores wounded, some critically. Survivors report seeing people becoming "human torches" and "charred bodies," as what is being described as a "fireball" exploded from an escalator area to a ticket office nearby. As people were seen bursting into flame, others were stumbling in thick smoke to find the exits, and fighting desperately to clamber onto a moving train, whose drivers had been ordered not to stop at the station.

Scotland Yard officials immediately excluded terrorism as an explanation. Indeed, as anyone who has been on the London Underground recently could attest, the only surprising thing is that this has not happened sooner. The Underground, like much of Britain's road-transport infrastructure, is a rotting hulk. It has decaying wooden structures that should have been replaced with modern equipment decades ago.

The budget-slashing model

Only 48 hours before, during her speech at the Lord's Mayor dinner in London, Prime Minister Thatcher had delivered a sanctimonious lecture on global economics, declaring that "prudent finance and living within your means" is one of the "fundamentals" and "sound policies," applicable "for all times."

The speech was billed as a forceful intervention into the U.S. budget debate, with Mrs. T., utilizing the logic of the greengrocer's shop, asserting the supremacy of "Thatcherism" as an economic solution for the world. She pointed to economic developments in Britain over the last six years, as a model success story. The British economy is notorious as the advanced sector's most rotted, "post-industrial" economy.

Died-in-the-wool "Thatcherites" are wont to point to Britain's transport system as a success story. Yet, King's Cross apart, travelers on British highways and on the British rail system have many a gruesome story to report. One often-traveled highway has been dubbed the "motorway of death," because of the frequency of accidents.

As we go to press, no explanation has yet emerged about the immediate cause of the horror. Experts are particularly

bewildered that the fire took the form of a flash, a sudden fireball which suddenly engulfed a wide area near where the fire began.

While it will take some time for inquiry committees to ascertain the basic facts, and even if it is found that an act of arson started the fire, the reason it became such a gruesome disaster is clear: Cost-cutting had led not only to reduction of services and workforce, but was the reason for failure to insert equipment needed to ensure safety. As a result, when the fire actually began, a lack of communication, direction, alarms, and adequate emergency exits left panic-stricken passengers floundering about in a labyrinth of smoke-filled passages.

According to British press reports of Nov. 20, London Regional Transport (LRT), the government authority which oversees the Underground had been warned, in a 1984 report by transport consultant Jonathon Roberts, that "fires will break out on the Underground." Roberts expressed alarm that many stations in the Underground failed to meet even minimal safety standards, and said that it was only a matter of time before people were killed. He called for measures like sprinkler systems, smoke detection devices, and alarm bells. By and large his advice was ignored.

National Union of Railway Workers official Alan Norman charged Nov. 19 that the staff keeping maintenance at elevators and escalators had been "massacred" by staff cuts. One Underground worker pointed to cuts in sanitation help, which posed a real fire risk and could have been the cause of the King's Cross blaze. He pointed out that teams of men known as "Fluffers," who clear away the dust and dirt sucked into elevators, had been severely reduced. As a result, the escalator had become "like a vacuum cleaner sucking fluff and grime into it. As it builds up and smarts smoldering, it could go undetected for up to six hours and then suddenly flare up. By that time, the heat would be so intense, it would really go."

Labour Party parliamentarian Frank Hobson, whose district includes King's Cross, stated angrily that nearly 2,000 jobs have been axed, with £1.3 million being "pruned out" of the LRT budget this year, and another £800,000 being slashed from the total maintenance budget for work which the unions say is vital to stop accidents.

As the *Times* of London put it in a Nov. 20 editorial, "The search for cost-effectiveness has been made at the price of safety." It called for immediately upgrading investment in infrastructure.

The staid City of London's *Financial Times* reported Nov. 20 that, for the time being, criticism of LRT would be muted, "out of respect for the dead and a sense of shock at the enormity of the tragedy." But, once this mood passes, the post-mortem will center on claims that LRT "is more concerned with cutting staff costs than with quality—and safety—of service. There will also be allegations that the system is close to breakdown because investment in equipment has not kept pace with a boom in passenger numbers." One key

criticism, stresses the *Financial Times*, will be that the Underground is a victim of "government unwillingness to countenance investment in public transport infrastructure. The number of staff running the Underground has fallen by more than 3,000 over the last five years and by nearly 1,000 in the last 12 months." While passenger usage has gone way up, management has "pursued cuts in unit costs," such that "operating expenditure is down from a peak of \$345 million in 1984-85 to \$319.6 million last year."

'Pray there won't be a fire'

The most devastating revelations came out of the *Daily Express* of London Nov. 20, which reported in a front-page exposé that London's transport chiefs knew the Underground network was a fire trap long before the Nov. 18 disaster, "but they ran out of cash before a secret operation to reduce hazards could be completed—and gambled against disaster happening before new funds became available." A senior London Regional Transport official told contractors several weeks ago, "It's a gamble but we just have to pray there won't be a fire until March 1988, when we can start spending" on a special hazard-reduction system again. The night after the Nov. 18 disaster, an LRT spokesman said, "The fire-breaks are a long-term program which because of domestic budget arrangements we had to postpone. But we do intend to continue with it when we have the funds." A senior LRT figure told the *Express*, "If we had unlimited funds, we would have done a major renovation on fire safety. But we were stretched for cash, and did the best we could with what we had."

LRT officials claim that money has had to be diverted into fighting muggers and vandals, and on more automatic ticket machines, to reduce staff, the *Express* reported.

An unnamed contractor told the paper, "We were told not to talk about this job. If the passengers knew how big the fire risks were they would never set foot in an Underground station again." The *Express* noted that passengers groups' demands for specially built fire exits had begun as long ago as 1904! It commented that "cost-cutting means fewer staff to help passengers, fewer cleaners to clear growing piles of rubbish, and fewer hands to save people in an emergency."

One non-British observation came from the *Wiesbadener Kurier* (West Germany) Nov. 20, which pointed to the incredible obsolescence of the British Underground infrastructure; indeed, on the continent, the kinds of wooden structures one sees in London stations have long ago been replaced by modern equipment. The *Kurier* charged that the obsolescence was a function of the economic ideology of the government, which "sees public services as a nuisance," and pays no attention to maintaining them.

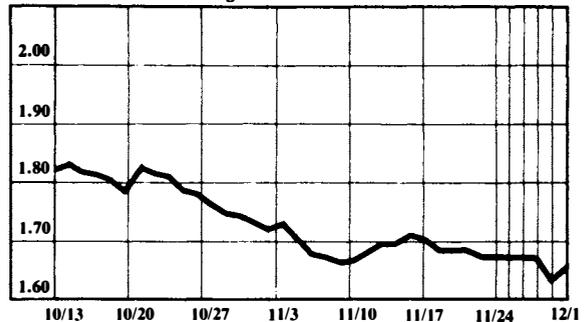
Writing in the arch-Establishment *Times of London* Nov. 20, University of London Professor Emeritus of Economic History Theo Barker, stressed the "urgent need for a bolder modernization program."

"The disastrous King's Cross fire," he wrote, "is not only a dreadful loss; it is also an awful warning."

Currency Rates

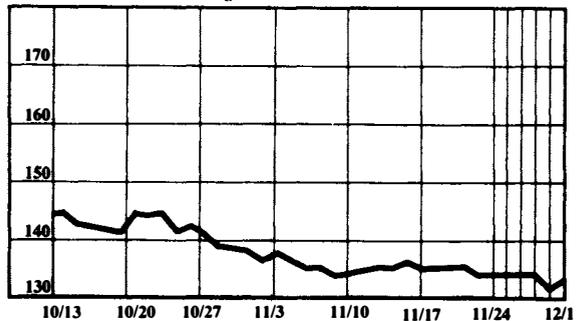
The dollar in deutschemarks

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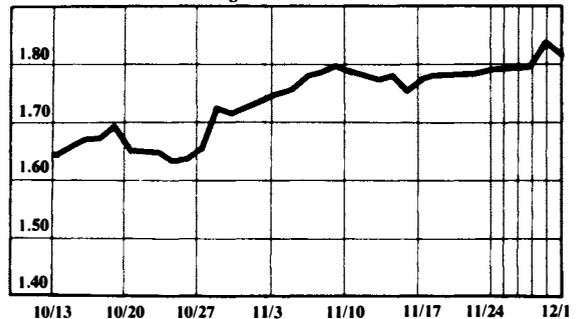
The dollar in yen

New York late afternoon fixing



The British pound in dollars

New York late afternoon fixing



The dollar in Swiss francs

New York late afternoon fixing

