

Greece: The infamy of a predicted rail disaster

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The following could be a dark humor joke, but it is a very real story and, above all, emblematic of this neoliberal and dilapidated Greece of the first half of the 21st century.

Only a few hours before the terrible rail disaster of 28 February, the president of the train drivers' union Kostas Genidounias commented on the visit that Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis was to make on 1 March, i.e. the day after the disaster, to the "Centre for Remote Control and Signalling of the Northern Greek Railway Network" in Thessaloniki: *"I have just read on a website that Mitsotakis will be at the Centre for Remote Control and Signalling of the Northern Greek Railway Network tomorrow. Can anyone tell us where the signalling and remote control centre is located and where it operates in Northern Greece? In Drama there is none, after PLATY to Florina single line, while towards Athens everything is switched off, after tx1 red, in operation Sindos, the line to Strymonas a jungle. What we are living????"*

In short, inaugurating his election campaign, Mitsotakis was supposed to praise yet another achievement of his government in Thessaloniki. Except that this achievement does not exist, that it is totally phantom! And above all, that it is exactly its non-existence that caused the deadliest (57 dead) railway disaster in the country's history!

So here we are, at the heart of this new Greek tragedy, at the non-existence of what is the most elementary guarantee of safety for any rail transport. But to understand the reason for this astounding lack of a signalling system, we have to go back to the privatisation of the Greek railways imposed by the infamous EU/IMF Troika when Greece was placed under trusteeship. A privatisation that - like all privatisations of public companies - had only one objective: to privatise the profits and socialise the losses of the company. This meant offering the private sector the operation of the rail network, which generates profits, and leaving the public sector with its infrastructure, which only generates losses!

If we were to stop at this reminder, we would have to conclude that the only party responsible for the rail disaster is the Greek state, to which the OSE (Greek Railways Organisation) belongs, which has the exclusive right to manage the infrastructure, and therefore the signalling system of the rail network. However, the reality is quite different. First of all, the acquisition of the operation of the Greek railways by the private sector (in this case, the "Hellenic Train" belonging to the Italian Ferrovie dello Stato) cost it only 45 million euros when its real value was over 300 million euros! And as if this scandal were not enough, the same Greek state committed itself in 2022 to subsidise Hellenic Train with 50 million euros per year to encourage it to operate the non-profitable lines as well, including the one linking Athens to Thessaloniki, which is more than...profitable! And the irony is that successive Greek governments have claimed to privatise the railways ... so as not to have to subsidise them anymore!

The result is staggering: after this real sell-off of the Greek railways, the OSE is disorganised and

forced to make drastic cuts to its budget, which means more redundancies and less hiring, less training, less maintenance of equipment and infrastructure and less investment. And of course, it is no coincidence that the railway signalling system, which was working without problems until 2010, ceased to exist from that same fateful 2010, which saw the appearance of the infamous Troika and its Memoranda, and the beginning of the trusteeship of Greece. All this combined with the successive defeats and frustrations of the people, and above all, the rotting of the political system, the corruption of the political staff and the decay of the state, which are the result of the neoliberal policies pursued by all the right-wing (New Democracy), left-wing (Syriza) and centre-left (PASOK) governments of the last 40 years, lead straight to disasters such as the one we have just experienced...and the others that are to follow. Inevitably...

Moreover, we have just learned that blind driving due to the lack of a signalling system is not only the prerogative of Greek train drivers. Indeed, drivers of the Greek capital's metro and commuter rail, taking advantage of the commotion caused by the train disaster, are now denouncing that the last section of the line leading to Athens' Venizelos airport is cruelly lacking in signalling (!) and that, in defiance of their protests, the private company that operates them is turning a deaf ear and letting it happen. Obviously, it's a miracle that we haven't yet had disasters similar to the one of 28 February in the Greek capital...

Ten days ago, the last scion of the venerable Karamanlis political dynasty, Transport Minister Kostas Karamanlis, who has just resigned, castigated a Syriza MP in parliament for daring to question the safety of Greek railways. Mr Karamanlis called the poor Syriza MP's questioning "shameful" and "hypocritical", before reminding that the number of train accidents in Greece is the lowest in Europe. The minister did not lie, but he forgot to say that Greece has the least developed and dense railway network in Europe, which is reduced to almost one line, the one between Athens and Thessaloniki.

Indeed, the curse of Greece's railways is not new or old. It is much older and has made the Greek railway landscape reminiscent of the Wild West in old American movies, at least until about twenty years ago. Old locomotives, old stations from the 19th century, and electrification that has just begun and is not yet complete even on the Athens-Saloniki line! Why is this so? Because the inaction and conservatism of the Greek state bureaucracy was soon joined by the organised obstruction of the "asphalt lobby", which has meant that the transport of goods - but also of passengers - has always been almost monopolised in Greece by the road hauliers.

So, our conclusion would be totally pessimistic if it were not for the ray of hope represented by the massive demonstrations of a certain Greek youth that started in the aftermath of the terrible railway disaster of 28 February, and that continue until today. Demonstrations that tend to spread and that proclaim loud and clear that "privatisation kills" and above all, "Our dead before their profits"! Maybe this time, the drop of popular anger will make the patience that has lasted too long boil over...

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