

View on Fukuchiyama Line Train Clash Accident in Japan

Japan Confederation of Railway Workers' Unions(JRU)



On 25 April, at 9:18 a.m. a major accident occurred on the commuter line of West Japan Railway Company. The seven-car rapid train (5418M) derailed at the curve near the crossing and smashed into a multistory apartment building. Five cars of the seven-car train derailed, sending the first and second cars slamming into the apartment building. Two cars crashed and fractured into an L shape. In this accident 107 were killed and 549, injured. The tragedy was the second worst in Japanese history after World War II

The rescue work was continued every day. At first we were quite at a loss for a word when we witnessed the disaster, and faced an extreme anger and mourning of bereaved families. They took out their anger on the president of JR West, saying, "You are carrying human life, not baggage!" "90 seconds took my son's life!" We were determined to respond to this painful voice and to start working on investigating what had really happened.

Problem of Management Policy of JR West

I would like to make it clear that it was caused as a result of two major factors, one was a management policy which puts operations before safety and the other was high pressure workplace control which forced workers into a constant state of fear. It is almost certain that the direct cause of the accident was the train entering a 300 meters radius curve at excessive speed, far beyond the speed limit of 70 km/h. The reason why the driver increased speed at the curve was because he overran at a previous station and he was trying to make up for lost time. Why did he try so hard to recover such a small amount of time?

Here is the key to solve this question. Please look at the newspaper article dated Oct. 2001, which is attached to this report. This article talks about a 44-year-old driver who worked for JR West and who caused one minute delay. As a result of this he was severely berated by JR West supervisors, resulting in his suicide. JR

West submits employees to punishment called “Nikken kyoiku”, an in-house re-education program, on a pretext of small delays of trains and minor mistakes. He was a member of JRU.

During the re-educational process of “Nikken kyoiku”, workers are surrounded by supervisors who heap rebukes and abuse on them, and they are subjected to meaningless work and forced to write reports day after day. This kind of punishment is continued until the person loses his/her mental balance and is forced to admit his/her fault and ‘bad behavior’ and to promise to quit their job as drivers if they commit another mistake. If such painful days are continued, no one can keep their physical and mental condition. Although workers became drivers because they loved the railway, many members left JR West because of unendurable pain and some of them committed suicide.

The driver who overran the station with 90 seconds delay was probably thinking of the punishment he would have to undergo with fear and dread. This driver who was only 23 years old probably felt that he never wanted to undergo “Nikken kyoiku” again, because he had been subjected to it for 13 days already. I believe that because he desperately wanted to avoid undergoing such a punishment, he accelerated the speed to recover lost time. In other words, the fear made him disordered. This time, the same fear as that which killed the 44-year-old driver claimed the lives of many passengers and the young driver. The same undercurrent underlies the two accidents.

Apparently being aware that he would be in trouble again with the manager, the driver persuaded the conductor at the back of the train to report he had overrun the station by 8 meters. But the length was actually 40 meters.

Afterward this was questioned. It was reported that the Chairman of JR West, Nanya, announced it was “unthinkable” that the driver and conductor could lie like this. But I think that the manager of JR West should seriously consider why employees made a decision to do so before he blames the driver and the conductor for their lie. It is obvious that rather than blaming the conductor for the lie so he could sympathetically protect the young driver from harsh treatment by the company, the managers should be blamed for workplace control which submits employees to such great fear.

Problem of Re-education Program, “Nikken kyoiku”

I would like to talk about “Nikken kyoiku”. In June, 2004, the Human Rights Protection Committee of the Bar Association of Hyogo Prefecture issued a

recommendation for the president of the Kobe branch of JR West. It said the committee recognized that “Nikken kyoiku” which was imposed on the driver of Himeji Railway Division in Feb.2002, violated human rights and personal rights of the complainant, and the committee also recommended for the president of Kobe branch not to repeat such a kind of violation on human rights. The reason was described as follows.

“The content of day-shift work regarding this case was mainly to write out company rules and to pull out weeds in the company’s gardens surrounding the building. As for transcription of the company’s rules, it subjects a grown man to physical and mental suffering, and it is questionable whether it has an educational meaning to order the transcription without voluntary will. As to pulling out weeds, it is inappropriate for improving the ability and quality of a driver after returning to work, and it causes physical and mental suffering as well. In other words, it is recognized that this kind of education forces physical and mental suffering on the complainant, and it has little reasonable and educational meaning and one of its purposes is to publicly ridicule the complainant. Therefore it is concluded that it violates the complainant’s personal rights because it is undue in terms of both purpose and means.”

Since the occasion of the Higashi-Nakano accident of JR East in Dec.1988, we, JRU, have adopted the policy, “Root cause analysis must come before blaming workers,” and also we have been calling for companies to stop punishment systems such as “Nikken kyoiku”. Even an employee, who tries seriously to work safely, may make a mistake and cause an accident, if incidental factors occur all together. If a reprimand is strictly imposed on the employee, a similar accident could occur repeatedly without analyzing the real cause and taking preventative measures to eradicate the root cause. The problem is how to create a system to prevent mistakes from causing accidents. This way of thinking has already been established in the aviation industry.

JR West company is opposed to the view of JRU. In 1990, the International Railway Safety Conference was held sponsored by JR East’s labor and management, gathering world wide railway workers and management. JR West Company refused to attend this conference, saying that safety-related issues should be the responsibility of management. At the same time the president of JR West Union, a company-based union, also refused it. This person proceeded to split our union, JRU, in the following spring. Although JRU members’ union in this region has become a minority due to this split, we have been bravely struggling against brutal

workplace control under undue attack by the company. Meanwhile, the Labor Relations Commission and law-courts ruled a series of sentences appreciating the JR West's stance against undue attitude of JR West Company.

Continuation of Extraordinary Accidents in JR West

JR West has serious and unusual accidents continuously. A rail collision between a train of Shigaraki-kogen Railway Co. (SKR) and that of JR West occurred in May, 1991, claiming 42 lives. JR West has been refusing to admit responsibility since the accident occurred 12 years ago. However, as a court convicted JR West of their corporate responsibility in 2003, JR West finally apologized to the bereaved families. The direct cause of the accident was the SKR's train started to run, ignoring a signal, which was malfunctioning due to the effects of construction without being noticed by JR West. The court sentence said that JR West had a serious responsibility for correcting SKR's behavior though JR West had acknowledged it before the accident.

In 1999, a 200 kilogram concrete piece of tunnel wall fell on a Shinkansen bullet train in the Fukuoka tunnel of the Sanyo Shinkansen. JR West investigated the tunnels and declared them safe. But after that a 226 kilogram piece of concrete wall again fell in the Kita-Kyushu tunnel. The reliability of this investigation was questioned and they were obliged to totally re-inspect.

In 2002, another accident occurred. A junior high school student had been struck by a railway train at the point between Amagasaki Station and Tsukamoto Station on the Tokaido Line, and rescue workers were trying to take care of this student. In spite of this, a train rushed into the site at a speed of 100 km/h, and two rescue workers were struck, one killed. A court pointed out there were communication problems and also cited JR West's strict policy of operating on time as another factor.

Up to this year, another case was uncovered. On April 1, 2005, a JR freight train struck a woman at a level crossing on the JR Hokuriku Line, and the JR driver was interviewed in a police investigation. During this period a JR West driver started to move the train without confirming whether people who came to deal with the accident had left the site.

This kind of operation-oriented policy appeared at the workplaces. JR West says in the "Medium-term Management Target" called "Challenge 2008" that "train-delay would betray customers' confidence" and "early recovery is quite significant in an emergency," calling for employees to minimize downtime.

The president of Osaka district office of JR West said at the chief meeting held last August, "We have many things to do. But we can't do all of them. So we have to make a decision somewhere, nevertheless we must not cause an accident. Preventing an accident is not an absolute. For example we can accept a falling stone on our knee but not on our head." We conclude that the real cause of this accident is to control the workplaces by subjecting employees to fear under operation-oriented management policy.

Four months have passed since April 25. JR West released a "Project to Enhance Safety" as measures to prevent accidents on May 31. The Senior Advisor and some other officials resigned. On June 19 traffic operation resumed on Fukuchiyama line. Based on the "Project", JR West set up ATS-P, Automatic Train Stop, (to tell the truth, up to April 25 only an old type of ATS was put in place on Fukuchiyama line), revised its train timetable so as to have greater latitude and started to reconsider its re-education program. But nothing has changed in its corporate culture. As for "Nikken Kyoiku" even if the company reduced days to re-educate workers, their stance has not changed. The management still have an intention to attribute errors or accidents to workers' carelessness or unskillfulness. Moreover, Mr. Kakiuchi, the president of JR West, says, "On April 25, a train of the company caused a truly tragic accident of derailment, resulting in 106 fatalities... ." He doesn't include one more victim. The 23-year-old driver was also killed by the profit-oriented policy of the company, wasn't he?

Has the workplace changed? Has the company changed? Look at an article of a newspaper issued on July 25. Workers' answers to the questionnaire tell the actual state of JR West.

A Labor Union's roll

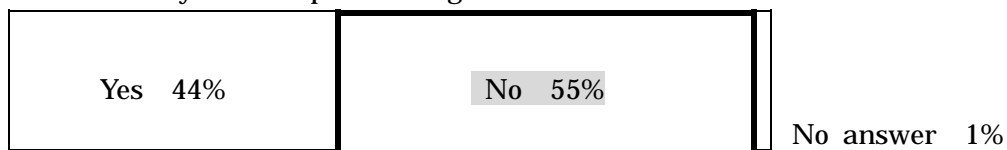
My last comment is on the idea that this accident was caused by the privatization of the railway. As competition is prioritized under the neo-liberal policies everywhere in the world, the companies, whether privatized or governmental, are exposed to competition. They always come under a profit-making pressure at the cost of safety. I think it is the role of labor unions to check the company (whether public or private) guarding them from danger and to discuss measures to solve problems. And it is clear that all of the JR companies after privatization of the JNR have a stance like JR West. Among all the privatized JR companies, it is only JR West that has a pay-by-merit system. I think this system forces acute competition on workers and this is used as leverage to control workers with a high-handed approach. However, in the storm of

neo-liberal globalization, other JR companies are under strong pressure going the same way as JR West. So JRU wants to continue to fight against such pressures and in regard to JR West we'll ask for rebuilding its management policies with the systems under a real safety control.

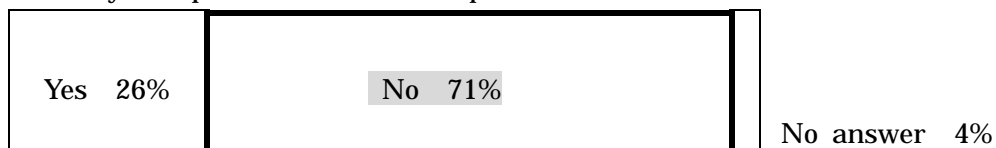
Questionnaire Survey of JR West crew's opinion

From Asahi Shimbun (The Asahi), Jul.25

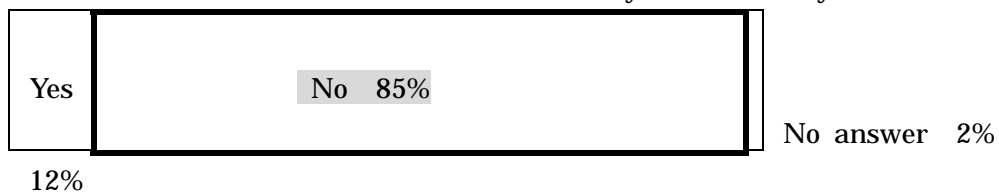
1. Has the mood of your workplace changed after the accident?



2. The management say they won't blame you if you submit the report on minor incidents. Do you expect the number of reports increase?



3. Is the revised railroad timetable comfortable when you work? Are you at ease?



4. What do you want to request the most on the next revision of the railroad schedule?

* More marginal timing	49%
* More standing time	18%
* Review of the most rapid train schedule	10%
* More transfer time (at junction stations)	9%

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