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ASD ON THE BLOCK



A busy time at Le Sépey.

PHOTO: Phil Emond

On Friday August 27th two service trains on the Agile-Le Sépey-Les Diablerets (ASD) line of the Transports Publics du Chablais (TPC) collided head-on southwest of the station at Plambuit where they were due to pass. The driver of the down train apparently simply slowed for the station and ignored the booked crossing manoeuvre. Six people were injured; one was heli-lifted out from the almost inaccessible crash site, on a 1:16 grade in a heavily wooded steep-sided valley, whilst the others walked to safety. The incident occurred at 16.20 when the up train was busy with schoolchildren. Both ASD units were withdrawn from service and a two-car train from the TPC's Agile-Leysin line was drafted in when services were resumed on Sunday. Interestingly the line is not signalled - the trains run on a timetabled basis. A similar incident the previous August led the BAV to

recommend that a long-overdue CHF10m-15m signalling scheme should be installed, but apparently Canton Vaud and the Federal authorities are at odds as to who should fund it. Bern thinks that replacing the ASD with buses would be better value for money. The Canton points out that the train serves communities buses could not easily get to. This further incident should concentrate minds.

S'murmeli, our Swiss railwayman friend, comments: it is interesting that in the UK an 1889 law required that all passenger-carrying lines had to have absolute block signaling installed and despite heavy costs this requirement had been complied with by 1904, resulting in British signaling practice becoming totally different to that in other jurisdictions. Lovers of our Swiss railways may remember when many stations had levers and a locking frame, not in a signal

box, but directly under the station master's control, sometimes on the platform. A few remain (as at Hinwil). Contrary to British practice, it was never obligatory to have absolute block on passenger lines, and not even on single lines carrying two-way traffic. Equally, there were no tokens or staffs. However absolute block signaling and other safety improvements were widely installed on major routes, but elsewhere dispatching by timetable and telephone order, hand signal and central regulation, remained normal.

Even in 1980 there were 31 sections of line in Switzerland without absolute block installations. These included most of the Appenzeller Bahnen and SGA, some 55 km of the FO, the YStC, AOMC, WB, BTI, CJ, NSTCM, and most mountain railways. By 2005 there were only 12 such sections, and by 2010 only 10. Along with the ASD these included: some museum lines; L'Isle – Apple on the BAM; Les Brenets – Le Locle and La Chaux-de-Fonds – Les Pont de Martel on the TRN-cmn;

Sursee-Triengen (ST) and the MIB. Some of these are one-train operations, but not all, and fortunately there have been few incidents. Notable though is the ASD, which as noted elsewhere has had two collisions in 12 months. This may be scandalous, and certainly the one on 19th August 2009, that involved a passenger and a works train between Les Planches and Les Echenards, had every sign of confusion with various rules being neglected. Both crashes were strictly inexcusable but safe operation without block is, under standard rules, perfectly possible and had been approved by the Federal Office of Transport (BAV). Neglect, familiarity, and momentary lapses, can however be disastrous. If the ASD survives potential closure some form of simple block signaling will surely be installed, just as was done on the BTB (now BLT) after a head-on collision in fog near Therwil (BL) in 1951. Today even the Gornergrat (GGB) and the BOB to Lauterbrunnen & Grindelwald have absolute block protection, something not even considered back in 1980.

ASD 402 at Diablerets.

PHOTO: Bryan Stone

