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THE BLS – INDEPENDENT AND INNOVATIVE.

Der Beobachter




The BLS is a private railway, at least in law, although various public bodies hold many of its shares. Outside Switzerland not many people will know that in 1964 the Federal Parliament seriously discussed nationalizing it, particularly as the then heavy cost of providing double track on the mountain section was being considered. Now it has its double track on the old line, plus the Lötschberg Base Tunnel funded by the state, and although today a very different organisation than 45 years ago it is still a private company. It operates railways, buses, ships and the automobile transfer service through the old Lötschberg Tunnel. Some of these activities are performed under contract to the Confederation and to Cantonal authorities whilst others, notably its freight services, are on its own account. BLS Cargo was established in 2001 and it is actually a separate company in which its Swiss parent only owns 52%, whilst DB Schenker owns 45% and IMT of Italy 3%. It is only the BLS rail services that generate a surplus as all its other activities are loss making, and if there is the long-feared decline in seasonal foreign tourism this may get worse. In 2010 the BLS made a profit of CHF4.92m, 62% less than in 2009, a sum that is clearly not enough to cover future indebtedness. For example in 2014 it must take up CHF350m in credits to fund the new rolling stock it has ordered for the Berner S-Bahn. However, there are also distorting factors to its results such as the CHF19m that was transferred to the underfinanced Pension Fund in 2010. In doing so the BLS noted that the SBB, with which it competes in some sectors, was given a grant of CHF1.15 billion by the Confederation to restore its Pension Fund, whilst the BLS received no such subsidy. The BLS has again

made clear its wish to see a total separation from the SBB of infrastructure management and track access arrangements. These are still under the control of SBB Infrastructure, although Switzerland has agreed to take up the model of rail deregulation of the EU. To be fair there is no evidence of any discriminatory practice by the State Railway as is feared in France or Germany, but BLS is understandably nervous; the success of its competitive stand for freight traffic, in which it is relatively successful, depends entirely on its access to wider networks than its own short main line.

As an independent organisation the BLS never simply followed the equipment policy of the SBB, but was often more innovative. Today it is forgotten that some 50 years ago there was an intense and bitter intellectual competition between the BLS and SBB for a new locomotive generation utilizing the new technologies in electric power that were emerging. The SBB played safe, and their prototype engine No.11201 had classic transformers and step-control of the power of its conventional motors, where as the BLS chose silica diode rectifiers and received a remarkable machine. With a power rating of 6,200hp; a 140kph capability (which at the time could not be used anywhere on the BLS); 32t of tractive effort; and 80t all-up weight giving excellent adhesion characteristics, this engine was a revolution. This was proved again in September 1965 when No.261 ran trials on the Semmering line in Austria.

No.262 followed, at first as an Ae4/4, and over five years orders brought the numbers up to twelve. They took over both passenger and freight trains on the then still single-track BLS main line with its 1 in 33 grades. In 1968 BBC asked to

have No.261 back, to install an experimental thyristor control and ac motors. It returned to the BLS with 6,780hp plus the benefit of step-less control of the power application. Normal today this was revolutionary then, and the ÖBB again borrowed No.261 for more trials. Although the Austrians were impressed they actually bought thyristor engines from Sweden's ASEA and No.261 returned to Spiez to be later rebuilt in its original form.

In the meantime, however, five examples were re-numbered to Nos.161 – 165, and reflecting their approval for higher speed, re-classified as Re4/4. By 1984 the BLS would ultimately have 35 similar engines. So the oldest are now 47 y/o, the latest only 27 years. Today they are still tough and can, in pairs, handle the heaviest Lötschberg jobs, but with the base tunnel, and new engines readily available, the Re4/4, now known as 'Brüneli', or 'Little Brownies', are becoming superfluous. Accident damage has taken some and in January 2011 No.161, getting near an expensive heavy overhaul, was withdrawn from service and broken-up in July 2011. This pioneer engine spent its final days working the Golden Pass connection to Zweisimmen, a typical job nowadays for a few of these engines. They still run on the main line on freight, and to Basel on charter block freights, but have also recently left their niche on the Bern – Neuchâtel passenger trains. Expect more, especially the oldest, to disappear at any time although last October No.163 was regularly scheduled on Zweisimmen trains. Today the BLS has a fleet of conspicuously under-used Class 465s, the 'Big Blues', these soon to be ousted from their Bern-Luzern jobs by double-deck railcars. The company also has many new high-power multi-current freight engines for the new world of European competition and Open Access. Sadly the 'Little Brownies' are now rather out of their depth. So if you were in the habit of not looking twice at them, just think again. They have made history, and after over 300 Re4/4 II and III, and the Re6/6s, even SBB were finally convinced that their rivals had got the specification right - but then it was for Bahn 2000. And, if nothing else, enjoy that colour - 'Swiss old-engine-brown'. 



OPPOSITE PAGE: No. 161 as '261' and No. 274 both southbound at Kandersteg. Photo: Bryan Stone

TOP: BLS 420 502 at Entlebuch on 30th August 2010. Photo: Mark Barber

TOP MIDDLE: BLS Fire & Rescue Train at Frutigen. September 2011 Photo: Barry Collin

BOTTOM MIDDLE: BLS 161 and a MOB loco at Zweisimmen. Photo: Bryan Stone

RIGHT: Preserved BLS 205. Photo: Roger Ellis