

The European Passengers' Federation: Background and current activities

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1 Who we are?

The European Passengers' Federation is a young organisation. It was founded in October 2002 as a non-profit association under Belgian law. It is a federation mainly of voluntary bodies but also includes two statutory organisations. Currently we have 18 member bodies in 12 countries and contacts in several others. Some associations are purely for rail passengers (For example: Deutscher Bahnkundenverband; Railway Development Society/Railfuture; Association luxembourgeoise des amis du chemin de fer.) Most are concerned with buses and trams and sometimes ferries as well as trains (For example: Bond van Trein- Tram- en Busgebruikers; Federation Nationale des Associations d'Usagers des Transports; Associazione Utenti del Trasporto Pubblico). Even the mainly rail bodies also have an interest in how to get to or from the station - and that often means by bus or tram.

2 Why did we form?

Several factors led a number of existing national or regional bodies to start working together in the 1990s. Firstly, there was concern over cross-border traffic. It was becoming easier and easier to cross national borders by road, especially after the Schengen Agreement. However, crossing by rail did not get easier and sometimes indeed became more difficult. Associations in Alsace, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Austria started working together and organised a series of conferences in such places as Luxembourg, Mulhouse and Lauterbourg. I attended e Mulhouse event in 1998, when Pro Bahn and FNAUT chartered a passenger train to make three trips on a freight-only line across the Rhine. There was pressure for up to four crossings between Germany and France to be reopened.

Secondly, with the opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1994, Great Britain was at last connected to the Continental rail network. This was a great technical achievement - but how should it be exploited to reach its full potential and increase rail's share of the international market? At about the same time, the development of Thalys provided better high-speed services between four countries; and in Scandinavia the Great Belt and then Oresund links increased rail's potential between Germany, Denmark and Sweden. A further factor was the increasing interest of the European Commission in transport matters and its desire for the input of consumers in its Railway Packages. Then there was the need for different associations to exchange ideas on good practice - ideas from one country which could be usefully introduced or adapted in another. Finally, the rail industry was becoming increasingly international. Therefore, it made sense for users in different countries to share their experiences of companies such as Connex or Bombardier, Stagecoach or Aviva.

3 How did we form?

No one woke up one morning and declared "Today I shall form the European Passengers' Federation." Instead, an evolutionary process took place as in various countries we realised we needed to talk with each other, work with each other and then have a more structured manner of working. Following informal contacts in 1998 and 1999, and a meeting in Zurich, we organised two lunches in the French city of Lille in July and November 2000. These were attended by British, Belgian, French, Dutch, Luxembourg, German and Austrian colleagues who agreed to call a Conference of European Rail Passengers in Paris in April 2001. That event attracted some 30 members and was addressed by Dr Ellwanger of the Union International des Chemins de fer (UIC).

We considered in particular high-speed rail and how it could be best integrated with conventional rail. Everyone wanted to make this an annual event and so we met again in Brussels in May 2002, when nearly 50 people attended. In the meantime, The European Commission organised a hearing in Brussels in October 2001 to enable passengers and consumers to voice their opinions on international

passengers' rights and obligations. Many of us attended this event which led to further contacts with the European Commission's Directorate for Transport and Energy.

By now it was also clear that we needed a more formal structure. Discussion papers were circulated to 13 associations and bodies who came together in Gent in October 2002 and agreed a set of statutes to set up the European Passengers' Federation. Since then we have held further annual conferences and meetings in Namur, Leipzig and Strasbourg; and are now planning our 2006 gathering in Maastricht. New member associations from Switzerland, Italy, the Czech Republic and Greece have been welcomed on board by our Administrative Council which meets four times a year. We pay the Flemish Bond van Trein- Tram en Busgebruikers to provide us with administrative support, but the bulk of our work is currently done by volunteers.

4 What are our Strengths?

Firstly, we have experience. Most of our associations have existed for at least 20 years and campaigned in their own countries or regions for better public transport. Indeed, the two statutory bodies - the Rail Passengers' Council and the London Transport Users' Committee - go back much earlier. So we have a lot of collective experience upon which to base our work. Secondly, our independence is a strength. Our money comes from our members, individual and corporate. We are not funded by political parties or trade unions. If our member organisations receive cash from outside bodies such as local authorities or the railway industry, it is for specific projects, such as a conference, publication or piece of research.

This also applies to the European Passengers' Federation itself. We welcome sponsorship for specific projects or purposes; but currently we are funded entirely by our members. Thirdly, our members are public transport users, whether on a daily basis commuting to work or on a less frequent basis for business and/or leisure. Some of our associations organise surveys to gather data on the good and bad aspects of the services which members use. Sometimes we undertake research into the costs and benefits of a new or enhanced service. In larger countries especially, such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany, our national associations have a network of local branches and affiliated local users' associations who provide us with detailed local knowledge.

Lastly, we are a democratic body. Our policies are determined through informed discussion from below, and not imposed from above. We also now use the internet to exchange opinions and help us formulate policies. In brief, we aim to be intelligent, well-informed, realistic laypersons.

5 Do we have weaknesses?

Certain weaknesses are an endemic feature of voluntary organisations. We are limited in our time. Most of us have to earn a living. Most of our associations have a small professional staff and the relationship between volunteers and paid staff has to be carefully handled. If it is done properly, however, it can be very productive. We also have to avoid being seen as "anoraks" - a term which may be difficult to explain outside the British Isles. We are enthusiastic about rail as a mode of transport; often we are also enthusiastic about the potential of trams and buses - but we have to avoid being identified with the enthusiasts who are more concerned about historical locomotives or the finer points of carriage liveries.

Lastly, we have to accept that no professional likes to be told by amateurs how to do his or her job. Our approach to the transport professionals has to be based on realism, good research and the willingness of each side to listen to the other. We do have to realise that the transport professionals are in turn sometimes restricted by the politicians in what they can do; and so lobbying of politicians at all levels is also an important facet of our work.

6 What are our concerns?

In 2003 we issued a 13-point manifesto in English, French, German and Dutch. This manifesto can be found on our website www.epf-eu.be and in leaflet form. The 13 points sum up the results of our early discussions and it was not difficult to agree them - since all of our associations had, to a greater

or lesser extent, had similar experiences. I shall therefore focus on the most important concerns and what we are doing about them.

7 A bigger role for public transport in international journeys

"Is rail losing the battle?" is a question posed by one of our colleagues after lunch in Lille. Certainly, there has been a decline in long-distance international passenger trains and in overnight trains. Dutch and Belgian colleagues have often complained that they can no longer board an overnight sleeper train in their countries. Brussels is, it is true, still served by the Paris - Berlin sleeper, but there are no longer sleepers from Ostend or to Basle. EPF therefore set up a working party to study long-distance international trains and make suggestions for improvements.

These range from better promotion, and more attractive fares, to better connections where it is necessary to change trains. Packages that include hotels and indeed a series of local excursions for the leisure traveller are also a possibility. CFL Evasion in Luxembourg is a good model for others to emulate.

8 Promoting rail

Our working party makes efforts to promote long-distance services. It has started an on-line bulletin "Initiative Fernverkehr", in German and French, telling people about services, recommending specialist travel agents and giving other tips to make the journey easy and pleasant - such as details of hotels near stations. We hope to make this "Initiative" more widely available - and that includes translating it into English. For EPF and its member organisations do not simply stand on the sidelines and talk about how the game should be played.

We get in there and play a part ourselves. Sometimes this means publishing our own material; or increasingly putting promotional material, or links to material, on our websites. We do not seek to replace the promotional work done by the rail professionals - we could never do that. But we do seek to enhance their work, and to adapt publicity and promotion for particular areas. Whether Line Committees in Belgium or local Users' Groups and Community Rail Partnerships in Great Britain, we make efforts to get people on trains. The train operators should therefore recognise us as partners rather than opponents, even if we do not agree with each other all the time. Our approach to them should be: "If you introduce a new service or facility, we shall do our level best to promote it."

9 Easy rail

This slogan sums up the sort of services that we want to see. It should be easy to obtain information, book tickets and make reservations. Yet when the specialist travel agent whom I normally use tried to book me on a sleeper from Munich to Cologne last October, as part of a return journey from Lowestoft to Salzburg, it was impossible. The reason: Rail Europe, the major retailer of Continental tickets in the UK, has no contract with City Nightline! There is an element of parochialism in the railway industry which discourages easy rail travel around Europe. We take every opportunity to urge the operators to co-operate with one another.

Another problem has been a reduction in the number of stations at which you can buy an international ticket. Indeed, the Dutch railways were proposing to close all their international ticket offices and rely on call centre and internet bookings. We are pleased that they have had second thoughts. Of course, we accept that the railways must adapt to changing times and the proportion of on-line bookings is likely to increase. 2004 statistics show 65% of households in Belgium with internet access and 64% in Denmark. In Greece, however, the percentage is only 16. Call centres are also an increasingly important way of doing business. We believe that we, as representatives of customers, have a role in feeding back comments and suggestions on website design, and on briefing and training of call centre staff. We have already started discussion with the Association of Train Operating Companies in London about these issues.

10 Integrated rail

In discussions which we have had with Eurostar (whom we meet for an annual brainstorming session), they have made the point that they concentrate on what they do well - getting large numbers of passengers quickly from city centre to city centre. We take their point - but not everyone wants to go to the centre of Paris or Brussels. Many also use Eurostar as a link in a longer journey. There is good integration between Eurostar and Trains a Grande Vitesse at Lille Europe. We are pleased that Eurostar are now offering attractive through fares beyond Brussels to Aachen and Cologne.

There is scope for further promotion of such journey possibilities. We are setting up similar meetings with Thalys. We are also concerned that classic routes do not become neglected once high-speed lines are opened. For example, there are passengers for whom the price is more important than the speed; and so, after 2007, they may still want to travel from Amsterdam to Brussels via Roosendaal; or, as I did earlier this year, travel from Rotterdam to Leuven by the shortest cheapest route, which means changing trains at Mechelen, which will not be served by the new high speed trains. High speed services must be properly integrated with local public transport and with classic routes.

11 Responsible rail

By this we mean a rail system that is safe, looks after its customers, compensates them for delays and cancellations or has contingency plans when things go wrong. We have had useful dialogue about this matter with bodies like the European Infrastructure Managers and Community of European Railways, as well as the European Commission and Members of the European Parliament. An American think tank once found that when customer service is bad, the customer tells ten people; when customer service is good, the customer tells one person. On this basis, rail services operated in a responsible manner should gain new business. But is the playing field level? I shall come back to this point in my conclusion.

12 Positive rail

This means emphasising the advantages of rail - as Eurostar does with its London - Paris journeys. But it also means not being so transfixed by the "Mehdorn limit" that you assume no one wants to travel more than 3 hours on a train. There was interesting discussion of this when I spoke at the recent European Training Centre for Railways seminar in Bruges. Some members argued that the 3-hour limit could easily be stretched to 4 or 5 if trains were attractive and comfortable; and that the state of the competition was also a factor.

One (non-French) delegate said, "I would never drive my car into Paris if I could get there by train." On another occasion, I was told by a railway manager, "We can't compete with the cheap airlines because people don't like changing." Really? A cheap flight from London to Brussels involves a train journey out to Stansted Airport and a coach journey from Charleroi Airport at the other end. That means changing. The railways may not be able to compete with air on a trip from Stansted to a small regional French airport like Rodez. But on a trip from London to Lyon, with easy cross-platform interchange at Lille, of course they can.

13 Is the playing field level?

In recent years, much has been spoken and written about the unfair advantage which airlines have over railways. They use small, subsidised airports. They pay no tax on their fuel. The latter arrangement dates from the Chicago Agreement of 1944, which was made to encourage what was then a young industry. Surely, by now, the Chicago Agreement has succeeded? Surely, now, politicians need to revisit this question? That is the sort of issue which we in EPF raise with politicians. We have already done so with the Environment Commissioner and the Transport Commissioner. The issue will not be easy to tackle, but it must not be ignored. It is part of a wider scenario of having a level playing field for rail to compete with other modes. Let us have compensation for late trains and a requirement for operators to publish punctuality figures. But let us also have comparable requirements for bus coach

and ferry operators. We in EPF will take every opportunity to raise such issues with national and European politicians.

14 Conclusion

I said that the European Passengers' Federation is a young organisation. But we are eager to work with political decision makers, transport professionals, academics and others with whom we can share common ground. We already have much experience in our individual countries. Our work at European level is a natural extension of that experience.