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THE PENDOLINO SAGA - THE END?

s'Murmeli



PHOTO: Courtesy Blick.CH

There is nothing unusual about seeing a 470 class Pendolino at Arth-Goldau when changing trains there as I did one morning in April. However, that day the announcer had ominous words - a platform alteration for the next SOB train over the line to Biberbrugg - and there was 470 006, theoretically Zürich-bound, standing where the SOB local would normally be waiting. As is often the case the northbound EuroCity Pendolino was late running, due presumably to "technical difficulties", and had been terminated here, its passengers left to travel forward on other SBB services. But what happened next? Zürich will have sent its southbound Milano passengers off on the back-up service, telling them to change to the EC at Arth-Goldau whilst passengers from Basel and Luzern arrived normally and changed as intended into the Pendolino, having regained its southbound slot.

Some days later on the 12th May came what was perhaps the last straw in the Pendolino saga. The self-same Trenitalia-owned 470 006 was severely damaged by fire when working its regular diagram on the Milano-Zürich EuroCity 12. The incident occurred on the south ramp of the Gotthard between Ambi-Piotta and Airolo. The source of fire was identified as being in one of the twelve traction motors on the train, this one under the second car from the Zürich end. The BAV (Federal Railway Administration) commented shortly after the incident that there was no immediate cause discovered for the fire, although there were similarities to a similar case in 1996 that involved a unit which caught fire in the Zürich - Thalwil tunnel. No 470 006 was itself involved in another less serious bogie fire incident at Zug on the 26th February this year. On the 12th May the train had a light load of 70 passengers who were all evacuated safely but commentators then asked what might have been the case had the fire broken-out only a few km further-on, beyond Airolo in the Gotthard tunnel. The most authoritative Swiss paper, the NZZ of Zürich, anything but sensational, allowed itself an opinion:

'This newest incident may now precipitate the long-due withdrawal from service of these troublesome trains.' That comment proved to be well-informed. At a press conference on May 31, Andreas Meyer, SBB's CEO, confirmed that the remaining 470s will now only run, at the latest, until December 2014. The major mid-life overhaul which is now falling due will not be carried out; the 470s will instead be withdrawn as they come up for overhaul. The joint SBB/Trenitalia Milano - Zürich service on the Gotthard route will, from now until the Base Tunnel opens in 2016, take 25 minutes longer.

At the end of May of the Class 470s only one of the five Trenitalia sets was operational, whilst of SBBs four sets one was under repair, and the three still running were only being maintained by a special volunteer 'flying squad' regime. SBB is already running several substitute train sets on this route, including some ICN 500 class sets 'diverted' from the Jura lines but these may not run in Italy, so involve a change of train in Chiasso. Another recent, and now well-established expedient, has been to run a regular back-up service of conventional stock on the route. The persistent failure of the 470s has resulted in rolling stock sorely needed elsewhere having to be used. As has previously been reported in *Swiss Express* SBB faces an acute shortage of high-quality passenger coaches, but CEO Meyer has seen that there is now no choice - the 470s must go. If the BAV enquiry finds a serious fault caused the fire on 470 006 they of course could be banned overnight. I have previously commented on problems with the next generation 610s, still being delivered and now three years late. One is still awaited, six are in service, of which one is understood to have received a limited license to run with tilt on the Gotthard route. The other five are working Basel - Milano via the Lötschberg/Simplon route. ■

Editor's Note. s'Murmeli (The Marmot) is a Swiss railwayman who is not involved with the Pendolino Saga.