

Foray No 2 into Europe

By Trevor Garrod

Six Railfuture members were among the 42 delegates at the second European Rail Passenger Conference held in Brussels on 18 May.

Also represented were rail and public transport users' organisations and consumer bodies from the Republic of Ireland, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and Austria.

The gathering was addressed by Jean-Arnold Vinois, head of rail and interoperability at the transport and energy directorate at the European Commission.

He spoke passionately of the need to gear transport policy to the needs of users, developing rail passengers' rights, encouraging the railway industry to enter into voluntary service agreements and formulating rights for rail passengers similar to those recently agreed for airline passengers.

The commission wants to encourage the formation of a "rail consumer platform" which could conduct its own studies, help to spread good practice and stimulate international rail travel. At the moment, international passenger services were clearly underdeveloped, and dialogue with the operators and the users was clearly necessary.

The second principal speaker, Anthony Smith, director of Britain's Rail Passengers Council, spoke of how the work of this body had changed in recent years and how it worked with Railfuture and local rail users' associations to tackle problems and improve services.

The only other European Union country known to have an official body comparable to the RPC is Belgium, and so this is an area where other countries could learn from the British experience.

Andre Humair of the Swiss Association Transport et Environnement gave a short presentation on long-distance passenger travel, and explained how the rail routes from Paris to Warsaw and London to Zurich might be improved, with more through working and faster journey times, to make rail more competitive over such distances.

Later the conference divided into three workshops to discuss in detail rail passenger rights, international long-distance traffic and cross-border travel. In these fields we were also taking forward ideas discussed at the first European Rail Passenger Conference in Paris last year. In



British, Swiss and Belgian delegates to the Brussels conference enjoying a trip by tram to the beauty spot of Tervuren, to the east of the city

Photo: Trevor Garrod

the final plenary session, there was wide agreement on the need to formalise what until now has been a very informal network of national and regional users' associations.

Statutes have been drafted for a Federation of European Passengers' Associations as a

non-profit making body under Belgian law.

At the time of writing, each of the dozen associations, including our own, is considering these and, barring any serious problems, it is planned to launch the new federation on 19 October. European level co-

operation and rail lobbying is moving quite quickly at present and by the time you read this there will also have been a meeting in Berne, Switzerland (to which Railfuture was invited), called by the Comite International des Transports Ferroviaires (CIT). This is a rail companies' organisation drawing up new travel conditions for international rail passengers.

The federation now being formed will report back to its members on the results of this consultation.

A further hearing by the European Commission, like the one in Brussels on 15 October, at which I represented Railfuture, is also promised.

Planning will also start in the autumn for the third European Rail Passenger Conference, due to be held in late spring 2003.

A report of the 18 May Brussels conference is available, in English, from Trevor Garrod, 15 Clapham Road, Lowestoft, NR32 1RQ. Please send £1 (payable to Railfuture) to cover cost and postage.

Friends in low places



By Peter Staelens

The Flemish "Bond van Trein-, Tram- en Busgebruikers" (Association of Train, Tram and Bus Passengers) is a non-profit organisation,

founded in 1980. The main objectives are to defend the interests of the public transport users on a regional (bus and tram) and national (railway) level, and to promote the use of public transport in general.

The BTTB-office is located in Ghent and has a professional staff of five people. These are supported by about 60 volunteers, who are active in different regional and thematic working groups.

Excursions to Belgian and foreign destinations are organised throughout the year, most of them with both a recreational and informative character. The organisation has 900 members, a number which has been slightly rising during recent years. Each member receives our quarterly magazine "Mondig Mobiel".

The main activities of BTTB are representation, lobbying, consulting and campaigning. We represent public transport users in a wide range of commissions, advisory bodies and parliamentary hearings.

In order to communicate our viewpoints, we

enter into discussion with representatives of public transport companies, politicians, journalists and the regional and federal transport administration. The expertise we have collected on the field is often used for consulting projects ordered by the Flemish government.

Another cornerstone of our activities is the "Week van Vervoering" (Mobility Week) in the second half of September. It usually starts with the European Car Free Day and ends with "Trein-, Tram-, Busdag", a promotional event which allows people to travel with all Belgian public transport companies (De Lijn, NMBS, TEC, MIVB) using just one ticket bought at a favourable price. For a small surcharge, the ticket is also valid on the trains of the CFL (Chemins de fer Luxembourgeois).

In September 2001, the BTTB installed the first three regional "Spoorlijcomités" (railway users' associations) in Flanders.

The intention of these associations (Gent-Eeklo, Mol-Hasselt, Antwerpen-Boom-Puurs) is to improve the quality of service and to enhance the involvement of the railway users and local councils in order to save the lines from further decline.

The functioning of these railway users' associations requires a lot of attention (communication, promotion, meetings, and investigations), but we expect that - eventually - the outcome will be positive.

■ Members of Railfuture met a party from BTTB during a visit to London in April.