Government cuts prepare rail disaster

Three derailments in Australia

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All the conditions exist for a major rail disaster in New South Wales and the situation will only worsen as the Carr state Labor government continues to implement cost cutting measures.

In just eight months, three major derailments have occurred that could have resulted in massive losses of life. Several rail workers have been killed and injured.

A goods locomotive ploughed off the tracks near Moss Vale in the state's south on May 19, costing the life of the driver and his assistant. The train struck a concrete column near a bridge following an earth slide caused by heavy rain.

On June 15 a passenger train leapt the rails in the Sydney suburb of Concord West, smashing down a fence and ending up across a roadway. There were no deaths only because the derailment happened in the early hours of the morning when the train was empty and the road deserted. However, the driver suffered three broken ribs and a broken leg, and the guard was also injured.

A spokesman for the rail authorities immediately attributed the accident to 'excessive speed' and blamed the driver for 'causing millions of dollars in damages'.

But a recent inquiry carried out by the Bureau of Air Safety Investigation into an early morning coal train derailment at Beresfield in the Hunter Valley on October 23, 1997 throws light on some of the underlying causes.

At Beresfield, 72 wagons loaded with coal, weighing 7,596 tonnes, went through stop signals, ran into the back of a stationary coal train and ploughed into the station. The driver and observer, as well as a passenger standing on the platform, were seriously injured. If the accident had occurred a little later in the morning, the platform would have been crowded with passengers.

The inquiry report said the circumstances of the incident were consistent with the crew failing to comply with caution and stop signals. However, it admitted that reduced driver alertness associated with work-related fatigue was a significant factor.

The shift patterns worked by the driver and observer of the coal train, 'resulted in a level of work-related fatigue, due to sleep deprivation, of sufficient dimension to impair hand-eye coordination and reaction and response times, and to adversely affect alertness,' it stated.

As well as 'driver fatigue' the report pointed to safety deficiencies including the lack of automatic systems designed to alert the train crew, or halt the train, if stop signals were passed. The report also referred to the 'ineffective functioning and use of radio communication'.

Following the report, Transport Minister Carl Scully moved to scapegoat workers. He announced a 'fatigue management program' for FreightCorp crews and their families, 'which explores how work, family and lifestyle influence fatigue.' It is not the 'high life' led by rail workers that causes increasing fatigue and tiredness but cuts in manning and changes in rosters that force train crews to work ever more extended hours and broken shifts.

A 1997 shift work and workload study of 24 train drivers at nearby Broadmeadow found they were accumulating significant sleep losses when working at night, exacerbated by roster changes, often at short notice.

One driver remarked that the only change introduced since the Beresfield report is that driving crews are relieved after a straight ten and a half hours of working and told to drive themselves home, thereby endangering lives further.

The worsening safety conditions are the direct result

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of cost cutting by the Carr government and its forerunners, both Liberal and Labor. Since 1988 over 30,000 jobs out of almost 45,000 have been destroyed in NSW State Rail.

Rail maintenance workshops that once carried out extensive repairs and major overhaul programs have been shut down and the work handed over to private industry. Hundreds of job classifications, many directly associated with safety and maintenance, have either been 'redesigned' to increase the workload, or abolished.

This includes the examiners who were employed to continuously check trains. The number of shunters has also been cut. Train drivers are now forced to carry out their own safety checks and in many cases do their own shunting.

The Carr government is introducing a maintenance system entitled, 'Fit for service', known in other industries as 'affordable safety.' Simply put, the resources provided for vital work, such as track maintenance, is determined by budget constraints, not by safety requirements.

For over a decade every attempt by rail workers to oppose the job cuts -- from the drivers' dispute in early 1980s against the cuts to crew numbers, to the struggles of workshop workers in the late 1980s and early 1990s against privatisation and closure -- has been isolated and betrayed by the rail unions.

Further cuts are in the pipeline. A spokesman for the Australian Services Union has predicted the loss of another 2,000 jobs. Yet the ASU and the Public Transport Union have not launched a campaign to defend jobs.

The situation in NSW is by no means unique. Similar measures are being implemented nationally and internationally. Everywhere governments are cutting jobs, outsourcing work and privatising rail services.

Since the privatisation of the British railways in 1995, three serious accidents have occurred, including the derailment in Southhall that claimed seven lives and injured 176 people. Over 100 people died in the recent derailment of the high-speed train in Germany. In Argentina 83 percent of the rail workforce has been cut in just four years and up to 40,000 jobs have been axed from Brazil's rail system in the same period.

See Also:

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