

Coronial inquest reveals deadly conditions in Australian trucking industry

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A recent coronial inquest into a 1996 road crash between a truck and two other vehicles in South Australia has shed new light on the extremely dangerous work practices in Australia's interstate road transport industry.

The Coroner's report, handed down on March 17, revealed that:

- Stay-awake drugs are widely and frequently used by drivers battling to meet schedules
- Drivers who fail to maintain schedules risk losing future work and thus their livelihoods
- Driving while severely fatigued is common
- The minimal regulations governing driving hours are often ignored

The inquest examined the case of Brian Snewin, an employee driver for the South Australian company, WRB Transport. In August 1996 Snewin fell asleep at the wheel of his semi-trailer near Blanchetown, about 120 km from Adelaide. He drifted into the opposite lane and collided with two family sedans, killing six people.

Snewin had been on the last leg of a double round trip between Adelaide and Sydney. Each leg of this journey of 1,400 km takes 16 hours to drive. From the time Snewin arrived at work at 5pm on Tuesday July 30 until the time of the accident at 1pm on Saturday August 3--a total of 92 hours--he had been driving for approximately 72 hours and had only 8 hours sleep. The remaining 12 hours he had spent loading, unloading his truck and refueling.

The final tragic journey began at 9pm on Friday in Sydney. Snewin took two ephedrine pills when he set off. At 11pm he took a duramine capsule. These drugs are similar to amphetamine, commonly known as "speed". One of the side effects of ephedrine is insomnia. Thus, even when the driver is able to take a break, he is unable to sleep properly. Snewin had taken only three short breaks during the entire trip.

While the stimulants took him through the crucial midnight to 6am period (when fatigue is at its worst) they rapidly lost their effectiveness around midday. Other drivers giving evidence to the inquest reported that Snewin had been driving erratically for 90 km before the crash and had wandered across into the oncoming lanes on numerous occasions.

Snewin was convicted of six counts of dangerous driving causing death and jailed for five years. In his evidence he said he had been under pressure from the employer to return the trailer to Adelaide that day. While accepting a large part of the blame for the accident, he stated: "I might have been the bullet that killed

them people, but I didn't pull the trigger."

The Coroner downplayed the comment and condemned Snewin "for trying to pass the blame on to others" but evidence given by another driver to the inquest, expert testimony, data from official surveys and even the closing remarks of the Coroner himself gave weight to Snewin's damning accusation.

Darren Pollard, another driver from WRB Transport, told the inquest that if he did not keep up with the schedules set by the company he would be allocated fewer trips and lose income.

Pollard's evidence was consistent with the findings of two surveys conducted in 1990 and 1991 into the conditions of long distant truck drivers in Australia. The 1990 study noted that, while only 30.6 percent of trips had a scheduled time of arrival, drivers felt it necessary to get to their destination early on 50 percent of trips, since this would allow them to unload early and pick up another job ahead of other drivers. In addition the 1991 survey found that 13.4 percent of drivers faced penalties for being late.

Professor W. A. Dawson of Flinders University told the inquiry that he had analysed Snewin's work-rest pattern before the crash. Based on the fatigue model developed at the university, Snewin "would have achieved the highest ever fatigue scores".

In his closing remarks the Coroner had to acknowledge the shocking conditions under which drivers are obliged to work. "I find that it would not have been possible for drivers to maintain the appropriate degree of alertness and vigilance over such long periods without resort to artificial stimulation," he said.

Though little time was wasted putting Snewin behind bars, no charges have yet been laid against the directors of WRB Transport, even though evidence to the inquiry demonstrates that their actions were a major factor in causing the deaths.

For example, it was revealed that the company was the source of the drugs taken by Snewin. Nine other drivers stated that the management sold them drugs and that payment was sometimes made by deduction from their salaries. Three other drivers admitted taking stimulants but said they obtained them from outside the company.

While the inquest only dealt with a single case, a broader examination reveals that the problems are not limited to one single company but are intrinsic to the industry as a whole and are driven by economic considerations and cutthroat competition.

The road transport industry in Australia and particularly the long distance sector is commonly thought to be mainly the province of large firms such as TNT, Linfox, Finemores and Tolls. While these

companies do have a high profile, in particular in areas such as express freight and large logistics contracts, they operate only a minority of the trucks on the roads.

Most trucks are operated by either owner-drivers or small businesses. With the cost of a suitable prime mover for long distance trucking standing at more than A\$200,000, owner-drivers and even small businesses are forced to enter into considerable debt. Many drivers mortgage their homes. Under continuous pressure to meet their loan repayments, they load themselves with greater amounts of work and take ever-greater risks to meet work schedules.

The 1991 survey found that 97 percent of loans taken out by drivers had a term of less than five years and that most loans were obtained on a low deposit. These arrangements result in extremely high monthly repayments. In addition, intense competition forces drivers to cut their rates to obtain contracts, reducing their income and trapping them in a vicious cycle that often leads to bankruptcy.

How owner-drivers and employee drivers are paid also places them under enormous pressure to cut corners. Most are paid according to the load or the trip, whether by distance driven or by tonnage carried per kilometre.

The 1991 survey found that 64 percent of employee drivers were paid by the trip and only 15 percent were paid a fixed salary. If other methods of payment, such as receiving a percentage of truck earnings or salary plus trip money, were included, the figure rose to 79 percent.

Long distance truck driving is known as "vigilance" work. The operator must be continuously attentive over extended periods. Studies have shown that this is the most exhausting type of work. While it is possible to sustain driving for approximately eight hours, fatigue rapidly begins to take effect after that.

For the first eight hours the risk of an accident increases only slightly, but in the tenth hour the risk is three times the average. If this tenth hour is at 5am the risk is 14 times the average. Most long distance driving in Australia is done during the night, when there are fewer cars on the road.

The 1991 survey produced alarming figures on driver fatigue. Only 15 percent of drivers reported no problems with fatigue. More than 50 percent reported minor problems, 26.3 percent substantial problems and 8.6 percent major problems.

Further, the survey found that 7.4 percent of drivers admitted to using drugs on every trip and another 37.3 percent said they used them on some trips. It also found the employees of small firms, who had less job security, were more likely to use drugs, to speed and work the longest hours.

From 1990 to 1997, collisions involving articulated trucks resulted in 1,309 fatalities, an average of 187 deaths per year. Estimates of the proportion of fatigue-related accidents vary between 5 percent and 42 percent. These figures are likely to understate the crisis because drivers involved in crashes are reluctant to give details of fatigue for fear of prosecution.

Currently three systems operate in the eastern states of Australia to supposedly restrict driving hours. However, there is ample evidence that these are mostly ignored, with little action by state governments to enforce them.

A National Road Transport Commission spokesman admitted

that the regulations and schemes were ineffective in curbing the trucking employers but argued that it was necessary to maintain them because "there is a community expectation that governments will take measures to control safety".

The recently-launched Transitional Fatigue Management Scheme (TFMS) belies its name. While introducing a number of new measures, such as driver training in fatigue management and health checks, the essence of the scheme is to increase the number of driving hours allowed in any 24-hour period from 12 to 14.

Trucking operators are bitterly opposed to any increase in restrictions on driving hours and often encourage their drivers to ignore them. In the late 1980s the New South Wales Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) stepped up its attempts to enforce the 12-hour limit. The backlash from the employers was so strong that the RTA imposed an enforcement moratorium that increased the limit to 14 hours.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU), while making statements condemning the conditions in the industry, has been at the centre of creating them. Over the last decade the union has undermined the opposition of drivers in the major transport companies to sweeping changes to work practices and increased workloads.

In 1997 the union, under the guise of campaigning for a pay increase, struck a deal with Brambles, TNT, Mayne Nickless and the Australian Road Transport Industrial Organisation--which represents 600 medium and large trucking companies--to increase the spread of ordinary time to 5am to 8pm (it was 5.30am to 6.30pm) and allow Saturday overtime to be counted as ordinary time.

Every recent wage claim has been accompanied by trade-offs that further undermine conditions. The straight-jacketing of what was once the most militant sections of truck drivers, those concentrated in the large firms, laid the basis for the imposition of the same conditions, or worse, throughout the industry.

While its members are being made scapegoats and victimised for the increasingly worsening safety conditions in the industry the TWU does not lift a finger to defend them.

When the *World Socialist Web Site* asked what the union had done to defend Snewin, who was a union member at the time of the 1996 accident, the TWU South Australian branch secretary Alex Gallacher said: "As the case was not your usual run of the mill, with allegations, counter-allegations and deals, we were not involved in his defence and ran no campaigns in support."



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