

The New South Wales rail system—a disaster waiting to happen

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Two recent incidents have highlighted that conditions exist for a major rail disaster in New South Wales, Australia's most populous state. Two weeks ago a coal train and a passenger train narrowly avoided a head-on collision when they stopped within 300 metres of each other.

The southbound coal train was on the same section of the track as a northbound passenger train with 20 passengers on board travelling towards Maitland, in the Hunter Valley, some 180 kilometres north-west of Sydney. A preliminary investigation indicated that the Freight Corp train had gone through a red signal.

On July 9, six carriages of an eight-car passenger train travelling from Sydney on the northern line derailed when it was diverted into a siding after pulling out of the busy suburban Hornsby station, where scores of passengers had alighted.

The carriages became tangled in power lines when they leapt the tracks and ploughed into a gravel embankment. Luckily, the carriages remained upright. Emergency workers freed the 66 badly shaken passengers and three were taken to hospital with back and neck injuries.

One passenger said he had been violently tossed forward from his seat. “There was a frightening jolt, then a second one. My biggest fear was what would happen if the power lines come down,” he said. Another said the train had entered the siding at normal speed. “I then felt like something was pulling me backwards and forwards. My greatest fear was that a fire might have broken out.”

The latest incidents follow a series of derailments over the past 12 months, all of which could have resulted in a heavy loss of life.

In May 1998, a goods locomotive left the tracks near Moss Vale, about 140 km south of Sydney, 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.

The following month a passenger train careered off the track, broke through a wire fence and ended up across a roadway in the densely populated inner Sydney suburb of Concord.

The train was travelling between 110 and 120 km/h on a section of track that was subject to 25 km/h speed restrictions. It was only because the accident happened in the early hours of the morning that deaths did not occur. The train was not carrying passengers and the road was deserted.

In October last year another derailment occurred at Beresfield, on the Hunter Valley line (not far from the site of the latest near head-on collision) when a locomotive pulling 72 wagons loaded with coal 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.

In all these cases, the State Rail Authority (SRA), aided by the media, attempted to shift the blame onto the train crews. In the case of the freight train derailments last year at Moss Vale and Beresfield, the Authority was forced to drop its accusations of “driver error” after an inquiry showed that cuts to manning levels and shift changes had created a high level of driver fatigue.

Following the recent derailment at Hornsby the SRA and media initially blamed “infrastructure failure” or faulty track. An SRA spokesman said: “Our reports are that some part of the track signal has failed.” However within two days, the SRA announced that a

“troubleshooter” would investigate if the driver had missed a stoplight. The Sydney *Sun-Herald* newspaper carried a two-inch high front-page headline: “Did he run a red light”.

Such claims were also bandied around in the media at the time of last year's Concord incident. A recently released statement by the SRA on the findings of an internal inquiry into the Concord derailment said that both track and signals were in good order and cited “human error and excessive speed” as the accident's primary cause.

Despite affirming that the track and signals were in good order, the inquiry recommended the installation of a mechanism to automatically slow trains going through caution signals and called for more warning signs near low speed zones— on stretches of track similar to that at Concord.

Another surprising statement accompanied the report. Transport Minister Carl Scully announced that the driver was free to resume his duties. Could this extraordinary decision, that is completely out of line with the findings, suggest that the government wishes to get the matter off the agenda, with as little fuss as possible, fearing that other issues might come to light?

Evidence has emerged over the past few weeks that budget cuts by the current state Labor Party government and its predecessors, both Labor and Liberal, have played no small part in creating potentially lethal conditions in the rail network.

A document circulated by the Rail Access Corporation (RAC), the body responsible for the maintenance of the track, reveals that the rail authorities have been forced to impose speed restrictions on 100 sections of track on metropolitan and regional lines.

In some areas the restrictions require trains to travel at no more than 10 km/h. The document claims that restrictions have existed for over 12 months on many major lines, including stretches between Goulburn and the country's capital, Canberra; on the Lithgow to Orange line; and on the Port Kembla freight line, which carries trains heavily-laden with iron ore, steel or coal.

The report says the restrictions are necessary because of “suspected faults or damage to the track” and “dozens of sections of track, ranging from 100 metres to one more than one kilometre” are badly affected.

The last state budget slashed capital grants to the Rail

Access Corporation from \$64 million to just \$7 million. At the same time the government cut its maintenance grant to the SRA by \$13 million, from \$123 million to \$110 million.

Given these damning facts, it is little wonder the NSW government has still not carried out the “wide-ranging safety-audit” of the rail system that it promised after coming to office in 1995. Such an investigation would surely have revealed the dangerous state of affairs, which requires the expenditure of millions of dollars to rectify.



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