At least seven dead in second worst rail disaster in Australia's history

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3 December 1999

The second worst rail disaster in Australian history took place yesterday outside of Glenbrook, in the foothills of the Blue Mountains to the west of Sydney. Seven people, including a young boy, have been confirmed dead. It is feared that the actual death toll may be 12, with eight more people in critical condition in surrounding hospitals. Over 50 people suffered injuries.

At around 8:23 am, the regular inter-city train from the regional centre of Lithgow travelling to Sydney, with an estimated 400 passengers aboard, rammed into the back of the intercontinental Indian-Pacific train, operated by the privately owned Great Southern Railway and travelling from Perth in Australia's west to Sydney.

Witnesses describe the front carriage of the Lithgow train as being "torn apart like paper". Some six metres of the carriage was impaled on the rear vehicle transporter carriage of the train ahead of it—the remainder was left on a 45 degree angle. Cranes and other heavy equipment were required to separate the two trains, with efforts to recover all the bodies going late into the evening.

All fatalities and serious injury took place in the front carriage of the inter-city. An ambulance driver told the *Australian* newspaper: "It was a scene beyond recognition... the carriage didn't look like a carriage. The people were all just mangled in together. They were all piled on top of each other. There was no sign of life".

Australia's worst rail disaster occurred in January 1977 when a commuter train on the same rail line from Lithgow to Sydney clipped a road bridge in the Sydney suburb of Granville—83 people were killed and another 213 injured.

The facts of the latest tragedy that are known point to the need for a far-reaching investigation.

At around 8:15 am the Indian-Pacific was halted by a defective red signal just outside of the Glenbrook railway station. Some of the 150 or more passengers aboard stated in interviews that an announcement was made that the train was halting due to signal failures and communication problems. State Rail Authority (SRA) workers were standing on the side of the tracks. At the time it stopped, the Indian-Pacific was on schedule and its driver notified the signal box.

Upon being given clearance to "proceed with caution," the Indian-Pacific traveled about one kilometre, where it was stopped by a second red signal. Why this signal was on red has not been confirmed but it is known that the Indian-Pacific driver correctly followed procedure and waited the specified minute before beginning to move on. According to a *Sydney Morning Herald* report, there was no phone at the signal with which the driver could contact the signal box.

At approximately 8:18 am, the Lithgow-Sydney inter-city train pulled into Glenbrook station, picked up passengers and was cleared to pull out. It is believed that, like the train ahead, the inter-city passed through the first, defective red signal after the driver followed set procedures.

The section of track where the accident took place is on a descent from the Blue Mountains, with frequent curves and bends.

With no knowledge that the other train had stopped a short distance ahead, the Lithgow-Sydney train proceeded as normal. As it came around a bend in the track it was confronted with the near stationary Indian-Pacific some 100 metres in front. Realising there was no way of avoiding a collision, the driver left his cabin, an action which automatically triggered the train's

emergency brakes, and ran to the first passenger carriage calling out for people to get down. It is believed that only seconds passed before impact.

All indications point to serious deficiencies in the signaling system, complicated by inadequate communications systems and the character of the track. According to the Australian Services Union (ASU), which covers railway workers, repeated concerns have been raised about the signaling system on the Blue Mountains track.

The signaling system in place is an automated one. It detects the presence of a train and triggers signals behind it to ensure that trains are kept a safe distance apart. In this case, however, the signal outside of Glenbrook was defective and trains were being sent through it. Without communications, neither the signal staff nor the driver of the Lithgow-Sydney train knew that the Indian-Pacific was halted at the second signal.

How compromised is the safety of the rail system, used by hundreds of thousands of people every day, if such tragedy can occur?

On August 14 the *World Socialist Web Site* published a comment entitled "The New South Wales rail system—a disaster waiting to happen". The article drew attention to the frightening series of near catastrophes over the previous 18 months caused by signal failures, driver fatigue, massive staff reductions and the running down of the rail system by cuts in maintenance funding. It warned that all the conditions existed for a major rail disaster in the state of New South Wales.

In the last 10 years, State Rail staffing has been cut from 45,000 to only 15,000. Surveys have pointed to the excessive hours being worked by drivers. The track maintenance budget was slashed this year from $64 million to only $7 million. Funding for overall rail maintenance was cut from $123 million to $110 million. So run down are parts of the rail infrastructure that speed limits as low as 10 kilometres per hour have been applied to sections of track.

The New South Wales Labor Party government, headed by Bob Carr, has declared that a judicial inquiry into the crash will be conducted and has offered its sympathy to the families of the victims. But in 1995 the same government promised that it would carry out a "wide-ranging safety audit" of the rail system, cynically trying to blunt criticisms and placate public concerns that already existed. Such an audit has never

been carried out and the budget cutbacks to the rail system have intensified.

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