

Rail and air chaos on the eve of the Olympics

Sydney's transport system places lives at risk

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Visitors to the Sydney Olympics will be greeted by a transport system in a dangerous state of disrepair. Just six weeks before the Games, such is the state of Sydney's rail network that there are now daily incidents placing the lives of commuters in jeopardy. The situation at Sydney's only international airport is equally perilous—a recent blackout caused the loss of radar and radio contact between air controllers and pilots for almost 15 minutes.

In the past 12 months there have been more than 30 train derailments on Sydney's rail lines, as well as a number of serious accidents. Over the past four years, rail deaths in the state of New South Wales have increased by eight percent, injuries by 20 percent, fires by 76 percent, explosions by 20 percent and rail buckling by 26 percent. Sydney, the state's capital, has been badly affected.

Last December seven people were killed and more than 50 injured when two trains collided at Glenbrook, just west of Sydney, following a signal failure. In the most recent serious accident, six people had to be hospitalised on July 25 when the electrical system in a train overheated and caught fire. The train's electrical doors short-circuited and passengers had to break reinforced glass windows to escape. Rail authorities blamed the fire on “wheel slippage” caused by rain and eucalyptus oil on the track. These are common problems, however, with which a properly maintained electrical system could cope.

On the same night, eight more people were taken to hospital when two freight trains collided, spilling 20,000 litres of dangerous chemicals. In another incident, a train carrying 250 passengers was derailed by a safety mechanism. Other mishaps include trains overshooting platforms, failing to stop altogether or being directed onto the wrong tracks—in one case for 30 kilometres. The Rail Access Corporation recorded 240 such “minor” incidents over a five-day period in July.

The additional strain on public transport during the Olympic Games will be enormous. An estimated 34 million people will travel by train during the 19 days of the Olympics, compared with the normal load of 14 million.

Services will be extended to 24 hours a day, with a 20-hour peak period for at least 17 days in a row. An unprecedented 95 percent of the rail fleet will be in use. During the busiest times, trains will arrive at the Olympic Park station every three minutes.

But years of government spending cuts have compromised rail infrastructure and left workers unable to cope even with present demands. Since 1988 more than 30,000 jobs have been abolished in State Rail, many of them in maintenance and safety. According to NSW budget figures, rail maintenance has been reduced by \$66 million—11 percent in real terms—since 1996-97 whilst rail patronage has risen by 20 percent. May's state budget also revealed that direct operating grants and subsidies to the government-owned Cityrail and Countrylink were slashed from \$263 million to \$186 million, a reduction of almost 30 percent. Capital grants to the State Rail Authority were cut by 11 percent, from \$236 million to \$213 million.

The break up of the single rail authority into three corporations in 1996 has led to further cost-cutting. By the end of 1998-99, the Rail Access Corporation, a private contractor responsible for infrastructure maintenance, achieved savings of \$296 million compared to 1996-97. According to its 1998 Annual Report “one of the major achievements of 1998-99 was a substantial saving in costs, including a reduction of \$50 million in track maintenance expenditure.” The report boasted that costs would be reduced by a further 30 percent by 2002—a year ahead of schedule.

The Liberal Party Opposition—which shares responsibility for these cuts with the state Labor government—has admitted that the rail system has been starved of funds. “The problems in the system don't simply relate to poor management, but dramatic under-investment,” its transport spokesman said last week. “Money has clearly been milked out of agencies and into the Olympics without regard to consequences.”

Nevertheless, the official explanation for the most recent accidents is human error. In particular, seven Cityrail drivers

have been stood down in the past month for allegedly passing through red danger signals without clearance.

There is no doubt that inadequate training is a contributing factor. In the lead up to the Olympics the government significantly reduced the training period for drivers. Four of the seven drivers stood down were former train guards, who were among 200 rail staff retrained to meet the demand for drivers during the Games. However, one year ago, the training program was reduced from 22 weeks to 18 weeks. All four drivers had been on the job for less than three months and one had only three weeks of driving experience.

The situation at Sydney Airport is no less serious. During the Games the number of plane movements will increase from 800-900 a day to well over 1,000. But following three separate incidents of equipment failure in just one week, there are major concerns about the airport's ability to handle the extra demand.

A power blackout in the airport's operation centre on July 6 provided a glimpse into the extent of the problems. The blackout occurred during a peak period when controllers were busy directing the movements of domestic and international flights in a 45-mile radius. At around 6.20pm the lights went out, the computer equipment shut down and all radar and radio contact with the pilots was lost. Twenty planes carrying 1,000 passengers were forced to go into emergency holding patterns until power was restored. An air controller commented: "Apart from a mid-air collision, there is nothing worse. It was a nightmare that I would rate as 11 out of 10."

The power cut out when two engineers performing routine maintenance work on the high voltage "uninterruptible power supply"(UPS) unit attempted to switch the entire power load to one of the twin-power sources, in order to work on the other one. The single source could not handle the load and the two back-up systems failed to take over. An investigation by the Air Transport Safety Bureau found that mechanisms designed to prevent power overload, when converting from battery to mains power, had been set too low.

Despite this, new settings have not been tested because this would require the closure of the airport, a costly endeavour that Airservices Australia is not prepared to undertake. Moreover, the faulty settings were not the ultimate cause of the power failure, but merely a symptom of the underlying crisis created by the drive towards "affordable safety" in the airline industry. Over the past 12 months Airservices Australia has cut maintenance on power supply units by more than half and eliminated vital positions.

Documents released by the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union show that UPS maintenance was reduced last July from 13.5 days a year to 6.5 days, while

maintenance on the batteries that feed the system was cut from 13.8 days a year to five. In the past decade 60 percent of technical and engineering jobs have been eliminated, and Airservices Australia is planning to abolish most shift work and slash a further 20 percent from its budget after the Olympics.

A further blackout occurred at the airport on August 1. One week earlier a central computer link between Sydney and Melbourne was disconnected, halting all departures for 10 minutes. This was the third time since January that the connection had failed. It has also been revealed that Sydney Airport's flight path monitoring system is inaccurate by eight degrees, significantly increasing the possibility of a mid-air collision.

These conditions arise from the protracted running down and selling off of public infrastructure. In less than 40 years Sydney's population has doubled to four million whilst road traffic has quadrupled. In the past five years alone, air traffic at Sydney airport has increased by 30 percent, with an extra 70,000 planes arriving and departing per year compared to 1995.

Yet national spending on infrastructure programs has declined from eight percent of GDP in 1960 to just above two percent today. The Institute of Engineers has warned that the privatisation of government departments and utilities has led to a focus on investment returns at the expense of maintenance and upgrades. In rating the country's infrastructure, the highest mark it gave was a C for some national highways. The rail network linking NSW with other states received an F minus.

The serious safety breaches at Sydney Airport and in the NSW rail system reveal the incompatibility of safety and profit and the reckless disregard of the government and business for the lives of millions of people. Beneath the manufactured gloss of the Olympic Games is a public transport infrastructure bursting at the seams.

In fact, the true extent of the government's concern for the public's welfare is apparent in the amount of money being pumped into the Games themselves, at the expense of vital social services. According to the NSW Treasury's own conservative figures, an extra \$1.3 billion would have been available between 1991 and 2001 to spend on hospitals, schools and infrastructure programs if it had not been spent on Olympic facilities.



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