

Australia: Near disaster as runaway train crashes at major rail station

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On February 3, an unmanned commuter train rolled for 17 kilometres reaching speeds of 100 kilometres an hour before ploughing into a stationary V/Line country train at Melbourne's Spencer Street station.

The driverless three-carriage M>Train left Broadmeadows Station and gathered speed as it travelled over a downhill gradient for 16 minutes passing through 12 train stations and 11 level crossings before crashing at the end of the line at the city's busy interstate and country train terminus.

Passengers were thrown from their seats when the runaway train hit the V/Line train at an estimated 50 to 60 kilometres an hour. Eleven of the 22 passengers on board were treated on the spot for minor injuries while four others were hospitalised. A rail worker who saw the oncoming train ran through the carriages warning passengers, while the V/Line train's driver jumped from his compartment five seconds before impact.

The M>Train driver, Brendan Linahan, had gone for a brief break at Broadmeadows and returned a few minutes later to see his train rolling away. During the course of the downhill run, the train's high tech "fail-safe" system—comprising three separate braking devices and two driver alert mechanisms—failed to bring it to a halt.

As it sped down the line, the runaway almost caught up with another passenger train that had departed earlier from Broadmeadows. At one point the two trains were so close they showed up as a single electronic blip on the monitoring system at the metropolitan rail control room, Metrol.

Train controllers, working desperately to avert a collision, attempted to divert the first train to an alternate line just two stops before Spencer Street, but failed because a freight train blocked the way. The leading train was eventually redirected onto a spare line

at the next stop, allowing the unmanned train to speed past.

With only moments to spare, controllers attempted to direct the runaway to a clear track at Spencer Street station with a crash barrier at the end. But the train jumped the electronic points, reportedly because of its high speed.

The final collision occurred at 9.34 pm, the very time the V/Line country train was due to depart. According to Ambulance spokesman James Howe, had the country train been in motion the impact would have been far greater and the "injuries significantly worse".

Howe said the scene at Spencer Street "was certainly alarming" and the interstate driver "was very lucky" to escape injury. The impact had fused his compartment with the front of the other train. "With the Waterfall accident we were prepared for the worst," he said, referring to a train derailment just three days earlier at Waterfall, south of Sydney, which killed seven people and seriously injured dozens of others.

Although the runaway train was monitored continuously on electronic maps and screens at Metrol, no warning of its approach was sent to Spencer Street to enable passengers and rail staff to evacuate trains, platforms and surrounding areas. According to Opposition transport spokesman Terry Mulder changes to the controllers communications systems that were recommended after investigations into two accidents in 2001 have not yet been implemented.

Inquiries are underway by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau, WorkSafe, V/Line and M>Trains, while a police inquiry has already been completed. Transport minister, Peter Batchelor said that a number of possible causes were being explored including human error, mechanical failure or some unauthorised interference at Broadmeadows.

The reference to “unauthorised interference” serves to play down the more likely causes—the lack of adequate preventative maintenance and the failure of systems supposed to guard against potential “human error.”

M>Train managing director Alan Chaplin confirmed that a problem with the train’s braking system had been reported to management on January 31 and that the train had been scheduled for maintenance “within seven days.” According to Chaplin, the weeklong delay was “within the accepted fleet-fault protocols that we use”.

He went on to claim that the reported brake problem was not a factor in the incident because it was a type of brake used to assist the main braking system in high-speed decelerations.

Chaplin admitted, however, that “there were safety systems on the vehicle which didn’t operate. The primary system is that the train shouldn’t have been able to move. And then the secondary systems which would allow the train to stop—both those didn’t operate.”

A search by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union of the runaway train’s maintenance history found that on December 28 and 29 last year, two drivers had registered that “the brakes were leaking off”, that is, they were releasing on their own accord. According to the union, even when this complaint was eventually attended to, the wrong unit was checked.

The lack of adequate safety procedures, unreliable communication systems and the lack of timely maintenance are not accidental. They are the direct result of policies pursued by both the present state Labor government and its Liberal Party predecessor.

Victoria’s transport system was fully privatised by the state Liberal government in 1999. A British company National Express took over the running of M>Trains and V/Line, but made no substantial improvements to infrastructure and maintenance. While both Liberal and Labor governments alike promised that a privatised transport system would be safer and more efficient, the opposite has proven to be the case.

Metrol, for example, on which the metropolitan rail network depends, continues to operate a 22-year old system for controlling train scheduling as well as monitoring train locations. Over the last years its back-up computers have been raided for parts. The

dilapidated system results in frequent breakdowns that trigger control signals to turn red, halting trains and delaying services.

Under its contractual obligations, National Express agreed to introduce a new “Metrol” system by June 2001. But a confidential company report that surfaced in May last year revealed that the new system was still more than a year away from implementation.

Moreover, “performance” bonuses to the tune of millions of dollars, given by the government to the private transport companies, encouraged them to cut corners and keep rolling stock on the tracks no matter what its condition.

These conditions have already contributed to a series of accidents, including a fatal collision between a West Coast Railway train with a B-Double truck at a level crossing in rural Benalla, four months ago; a collision between two suburban passenger trains near Epping Station in Melbourne’s northern suburbs eight months ago and a collision between a Connex passenger service and an empty suburban train, in which four carriages were damaged.

In 2001, two passenger trains collided in the Melbourne inner city suburb of Footscray. An empty express train sped through a stop signal before hitting the rear of the other stationary passenger train. Last year alone, there were 17 train derailments and nearly 270 serious safety incidents, including collisions, many at level road crossings.

Last December National Express pulled out of its contract to manage M>Trains and V/Line and the Labor Government was forced to resume control after putting the companies into the hands of an administrator. Despite the disastrous safety record of privatised rail, underscored by this latest, potentially disastrous collision, the Bracks Government is nevertheless persisting with its plan to tender out the rail system once again, a process that has the blessing of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union.



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