

Australia: Seven die in rail crash near Sydney

Richard Phillips
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Seven people were killed and over 45 hospitalised when a four-carriage passenger train derailed and slammed into a sandstone cliff face about 40 kilometres south of Sydney, Australia at 7.14 am last Friday. The double-deck Tangara train, en route to the industrial cities of Wollongong and Port Kembla, was carrying 80 people, including students, workers and retirees. The rail disaster is the worst in New South Wales for 26 years, since the January 1977 Granville train crash which killed 83 people and injured 220, and follows a number of serious rail accidents in the state over the last decade.

According to some passengers, the train, which was travelling through Royal National Park bushland, increased speed just before it left the rails three kilometres south of Waterfall and crossed the northbound line sideswiping the sandstone cutting. It destroyed two sets of steel pylons carrying overhead electric cables as the first two carriages scraped along the rock face for 100 metres.

The first carriage became airborne during the accident and then fell back onto the track, its right-hand side torn open and the driver's compartment completely crushed. The two rear carriages tipped over on their sides before the train came to a halt. Those killed included the 53-year-old train driver Herman Zeides and six passengers, some of whom were thrown from the vehicle during the crash.

Two local police officers were the first on the scene after being notified that an automatic alarm from the driver's cabin had been registered in Sydney's Central Station. Firefighters and other emergency service workers followed soon after, but dense bushland hampered rescue efforts and equipment had to be carried by hand 1.5 kilometres to the disaster scene.

Rescue workers found dazed and injured passengers trapped in the wreckage or lying beside the rail line, with cabling, pieces of carriage, glass and personal belongings scattered around the accident site. The last survivor was cut free from the wreckage some three hours after the crash.

While it is not yet clear what caused the derailment, government officials and the media have already dismissed mechanical or infrastructure faults and hinted at "driver error". Transport Minister Carl Scully told the press that the four-carriage train had recently undergone extensive maintenance and the track had been inspected and was in good order. But according to ABC-TV's *7.30 Report*, there have been more than 30 rail defects near Waterfall in recent months.

Some passengers have said the train was travelling at high speed. These suggestions, however, have not been fully investigated and are contradicted by rail authority information that the train was on schedule. The rail guard on the train, who has spinal injuries, has

been not interviewed as yet.

Despite this, on February 1, the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* published comments from State Rail spokesman Michael Gleeson suggesting that the train driver had broken speed limits. "[I]t's certainly not beyond the realms of possibility that [the train] could have been going up to 100 km/h," Gleeson said. Two days later, a *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial declared, without a shred of evidence, that "on-board human failure [was] the likely cause" of the derailment.

These claims do not tally with Herman Zeides' 27-year train-driving record. Zeides had an unblemished safety profile and was known amongst fellow drivers for his meticulous approach to job safety. It is highly unlikely that Zeides, who had an intimate knowledge of the line and was not running late, would have been speeding in 60 kph limit area that was well known for its difficult curves.

NSW Rail Tram and Bus Union secretary Nick Lewocki has dismissed the speeding allegations and suggested that track or mechanical problems could be to blame. "At this stage it's too early because we haven't been given all the facts," he told ABC radio, "What we do know is there was no crossover or switch gear at this particular section of the track, so it's either problems with the track or a mechanical problem with the train."

Investigators will interview a CityRail signaller who spoke with the driver minutes before the accident and an autopsy is being carried out on Zeides to determine if he suffered a heart attack or blackout. Even if he collapsed, all trains are fitted with a "dead man's brake" that is supposed to halt the train if the driver becomes incapacitated.

Whatever emerges from the judicial, coronial or state rail investigations, many questions are raised about the culpability of Carr administration itself. For more than 15 years successive NSW state governments have slashed spending and jobs in the State Rail system, privatised maintenance work and undermined basic safety standards. Since 1988 more than 30,000 of the state's 45,000 rail jobs have been axed and maintenance and service facilities corporatised and cutback.

NSW Labor Premier Bob Carr, whose government faces election on March 22, quickly moved into political damage control over the crash. Carr visited the accident site, announced a "royal commission-style" judicial inquiry headed by Justice Peter McInerney, and claimed that his government's rail safety record "compares with that of any city in the world".

Carr's claim that rail services in NSW are safe is patently false. According to the Australian Transport Safety Bureau, NSW accounts for the majority of Australia's rail deaths and has had

more than double the number of rail accidents of any other state since 1979. There were 569 people killed in NSW in rail accidents between 1979 and 2000, far more than the 263 and 196 rail deaths in Victoria and Queensland respectively during the same period.

In December 1999, seven people were killed and 51 injured in Glenbrook just outside Sydney when an inter-urban State Rail passenger collided with the inter-state Indian Pacific train. The inter-urban train driver had been directed to pass through a malfunctioning red signal. The lengthy inquiry found that productivity demands on drivers, poor or non-existent communication, faulty or inadequate signalling and safety systems were responsible for the accident.

Since the Glenbrook crash, there have been 25 rail safety mishaps, including numerous near fatal train derailments on suburban and rural lines. This includes a major derailment at Hexham on July 12 last year when nine people were injured after a passenger train travelling from Newcastle to Maitland, a few hundred kilometres north of Sydney, collided with a derailed coal train. Witnesses said it was a miracle no one was killed. A third train heading towards the derailment site was alerted at the last minute, narrowly averting a three-way collision.

The Carr government's breakup of the State Rail Authority into three separate stand-alone commercial entities in 1996 has been a key factor in ongoing number of rail accidents in NSW. Under this framework, the State Rail Authority retained responsibility for metropolitan train services, Rail Access Corporation (RAC) became the "owner" of the rail infrastructure, Rail Services Australia was the main maintenance service to RAC, and Freightcorp took over all freight services.

These companies implemented significant reductions in manning levels and basic safety programs. Train maintenance work and rail line and signal systems checking were drastically cut or outsourced. Maintenance of the Illawarra line, where last Friday's accident occurred, is carried out by a private company.

An example of the parlous state of the NSW rail lines was indicated by an RAC document circulated just prior to the 1999 Glenbrook crash. The document revealed that speed restrictions had been imposed on 100 sections of track on metropolitan and regional lines because of suspected faults and track damage.

Last May NSW Auditor-General Bob Sendt found that Rail Infrastructure Corporation (RIC), which is responsible for the line maintenance of 90 percent of the CityRail network, postponed major maintenance due to funding restrictions. The report said the backlog for basic metropolitan network maintenance for 2001-02 was well behind schedule and would cost an estimated \$73 million.

Immediately after Friday's rail crash Transport Minister Scully declared that Sydney trains carried up to one million passengers a day and it was "impossible" to have an "incident free" system. "But what we can guarantee," he continued, "is when incidents like these occur, we do get to the bottom of it. We find out why it was caused, what contributed to it and we do that in a judicial way and we make sure that recommendations are implemented fully."

In fact, the Carr government, rather than getting to "the bottom" of things, has resisted the establishment of wide-ranging investigations, and restricted public access to line maintenance and

rail safety records. The 1999 Glenbrook crash inquiry was only established after widespread public outcry and the Labor government has not introduced several of the key recommendations by Justice McInerney, who headed the investigation.

McInerney proposed the state government introduce 95 separate measures to improve safety but legislation required to implement some of these proposals was not introduced into state parliament until last year and will not take effect until later this month.

A December 2002 report into the Hexham rail crash indicated that it was caused by the same problems identified in the Glenbrook disaster—inadequate rail maintenance and track inspection, switching breakdowns, lack of compatible driver radios and communication problems between signallers and train controllers. The report revealed that the RIC provided no formal training for the installation and maintenance of the switching points and that its technical manuals were deficient.

Most significantly, three of the most rudimentary recommendations proposed by the Glenbrook investigation—the installation of fully operational black box data loggers, train-to-train radio communications and rationalisation of signal boxes in country and urban areas—have still not been carried out.

While the Tangara train that crashed last Friday was fitted with a black box, it was not working. When asked why, Scully said 80 percent of NSW trains had black boxes, but the boxes were not operational because they had not been calibrated. In utter disregard for those killed and injured in the accident, Scully declared that the boxes "would not have prevented" the derailment in any case. "The fitting of data loggers is well advanced... They will be operating by the end of May," he said.

On Monday, Premier Carr continued his strenuous efforts to deflect attention from his government's responsibility for the disaster. Carr told the press that rail safety should not be an issue in next month's election and warned the Liberals and other state politicians that if they tried to make the derailment "an issue" during the election campaign they would be "devoured by an angry electorate".

Carr's attempt to intimidate those demanding answers about the derailment and the ongoing safety problems on NSW rail, however, is destined to fail. Many voters are certainly angry, not with those who want to discuss what is happening in the rail system, but with a government that has corporatised the service, destroyed thousands of rail jobs, rundown basic safety and thus appears deeply implicated in the tragic loss of life at Waterfall.



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