Australia: Ticket inspectors on Victorian train leave youth for dead

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Ticket inspectors on a Victorian regional train travelling at 80kph (50mph) left a youth for dead on July 9 after he plunged from the carriage during a ticket inspection that went dangerously wrong. The callous treatment of the injured boy came as one of a series of incidents in which inspectors have viciously dealt with commuters over alleged fare evasion.

Fifteen-year-old Gavin Slipais boarded the M>Train at semi-rural Crib Point, an unmanned station with no ticket vending machine. Slipais intended to travel three stops to visit his grandmother during the school holidays. Several minutes after he boarded, a friend reminded him to purchase a $1.10 ticket. Interviewed as he was released from hospital three weeks later on July 29, Slipais recalled, “I walked up to go and buy a ticket because there was a machine at the other end of the carriage and one of the lady inspectors said, ‘No, it’s too late.’ I just didn’t want to come home with a $100 fine.”

Slipais returned to his friends, who were now being questioned by inspectors as well. One boy later stated: “I was sitting looking straight at him standing near the door... he opened it, had a look out and jumped out.” The boys screamed to the inspectors that their friend had jumped from the train. They allege that the inspectors simply shrugged and continued interrogating them about their fares.

The injured boy was only rescued because his friends left the train at the next stop and raced to the nearest police station to raise the alarm. Slipais lay injured for 46 minutes between the two stations before ambulance officers located him, unconscious with serious head injuries after rolling down an embankment next to the railway line.

Ambulance officers worked to stabilise him for an hour beside the track before he was transported to the Royal Childrens’ Hospital. He spent four days in a coma before regaining consciousness. Subsequently, he made a strong recovery.

Although the inspectors carried mobile phones, they made no attempt to raise any alert from the train. No inspector showed any concern for the safety and well being of the young passenger. On the contrary, according to eyewitnesses, they continued checking tickets and booking passengers as if nothing had happened. They failed to alert the train driver, who was oblivious to the whole drama until the return journey.

In media interviews, the boy’s stepfather Phillip Austerberry has demanded to know: “Why the hell didn’t the (inspectors) stop the train or ring the police? Why did they leave him to die on the side of the train tracks? They left him there like a mangy dog. You wouldn’t even treat a dog like that.”

Minister of Transport Peter Batchelor immediately intervened to try and hose down any public outcry, announcing three rapid inquiries by M>Train, the Victoria Police and the Australian Transport Rail Safety Bureau. According to Batchelor, any ticket inspector who had failed in their duty of care would be punished. Newspapers reported being inundated with complaints about abusive behaviour by ticket inspectors.

On July 18, M>Train announced it had sacked a female ticket inspector for not ringing emergency services within a reasonable time or telling the driver about the emergency in what it termed “a serious breach of company procedure.” Two other more junior inspectors were disciplined and demoted, while a fourth remained on stress leave. The company is hastily reissuing emergency protocols to all staff members. Not placated, Austerberry replied: “To me, it’s admitted guilt on their part” and insisted he would sue

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M>Train in the near future. “A slap on the wrist for nearly killing someone’s kid. I can’t cop it.”

The inspection was part of a revenue-raising blitz on young students during the school holidays, and was bound up with a drive to overcome a deep financial crisis that has been exacerbated by privatisation. The previous Liberal government privatised the public transport system in August 1999, just months before losing office. Last December, private contractor National Express handed back the keys to its three franchises—including M>Train—to the Bracks Labor government, which was forced to resume control and put the companies in the hands of an administrator.

Batchelor signalled that the government intended to recreate two franchised contracts based on a single metropolitan tram company and a single metropolitan train company to be tendered out within 12 months. At the same time, he blamed the disastrous record of privatised public transport entirely on the Liberals, in an effort to cover over the Labor government’s own record since 1999.

Almost from the start the private companies, unable to make a profit, complained that they were suffering large revenue losses because of fare evasion. The losses were bound up with a complex automated ticketing system introduced before privatisation, which was resented by the travelling public. The government’s answer was to employ 100 more station staff and 100 roving ticket sellers costing $33 million over three years and to allow the private operators to convert these extra employees into their own transit police. During 2002, National Express boasted of increasing the number of ticket inspectors from 110 to 240.

In June 2002 the government increased the transport inspectors’ powers, enabling them to demand not only names, addresses and date of birth, but also to issue on-the-spot fines if they believed a commuter had committed or was about to commit an offence under the Transport Act. Inspectors were also empowered to detain or arrest commuters, and to demand a third person or employer’s details if they had reason to believe they had been given a false name or address.

In one incident in June 2002, four inspectors threatened to arrest a female commuter who had forgotten her purse and could not corroborate her identity. When she received a mobile phone call informing her that her son had been involved in an accident, she waited to catch the tram again and the four inspectors fined her a second time within minutes.

Inspectors have been overheard threatening overseas students with deportation if they do not provide their full details. Pensioners often ask tram drivers to sign their tickets to verify that they tried to validate their ticket but could not due to a faulty machine.

The ticket inspection regime is aimed at bolstering the finances of a system that serves as a cash cow for private companies, but has nothing to do with providing adequate services for commuters. The Labor government has doled out hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies to keep the private companies afloat. After National Express quit, Batchelor announced another $20 million would be paid towards debts that the company had accrued with local suppliers. The remaining private companies are continuing to demand subsidies until the system is put up for re-tender. Connex Trains, for example, will receive $47 million during 2003.

The Labor government’s primary concern is to make the transport franchises attractive for re-privatisation. That is why it has stepped up the ticket inspection regime. In the last three months, M>Train has admitted receiving more than 100 complaints about inspections, while the Public Transport Users Group reports receiving complaints every day. The remaining private consortium, Yarra Trams, has just announced plans to quadruple the number of passengers fined by inspectors from 150 to 700 per week.

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