

Australia: Government-media witchhunt of train drivers falls flat

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All last week, the New South Wales state government with the assistance of the media, in particular Rupert Murdoch's tabloid the *Daily Telegraph*, carried out a witchhunt against Sydney's train drivers.

The aim was to blame them for the chaos that has engulfed the city's rail system, with hundreds of services cancelled, protracted delays and trains running late. Passengers have been stuck on crowded platforms or in backed-up trains in stifling summer heat.

The trains that remained in operation have been jam-packed with distraught commuters and students struggling to get to and from work and school. In an effort to avoid the crush, other travellers have sought alternative means of transport, resulting in city traffic becoming grid locked and buses carrying passenger loads exceeding legal limits.

The rail crisis is the inevitable result of the Labor government's nine-year regime of cost cutting and lack of long-term planning. But Premier Bob Carr claimed it was the outcome of a "phantom" industrial campaign "by 100 train drivers" refusing to work overtime to sabotage new "tough new health checks".

The *Telegraph* uncritically quoted the government's slanders, including unsubstantiated claims that drivers were deliberately running trains slowly. Articles appeared denouncing "rogue drivers", "renegades" and an "enemy that refuses to show its face," while demanding the rail authorities take stern action against any driver refusing overtime.

The government and the newspaper initially downplayed the numbers involved, so as to cover up the widespread discontent among drivers. According to other reports, about 300 drivers were refusing overtime, about one-fifth of the current driver workforce.

By the end of the week it became clear that the campaign to vilify drivers had failed to generate the hysteria that Carr and his media backers had hoped for. In fact, as media interviews and letters to the editor indicated, commuters were drawing the opposite conclusion and condemning the government for the ongoing problems in the NSW rail

system.

By February 13, Carr and Transport Minister Michael Costa were forced to call in the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) to cobble together some sort of agreement. The deal included bonuses of up to \$400 a month to entice drivers to work the massive amounts of overtime needed to keep the rail system operating.

Unfortunately for the government, many train drivers are equally hostile to the union, which has for years assisted successive state governments to enforce continuous cost cutting and downsizing. The RTBU had further antagonised drivers by declaring that it had not sanctioned the drivers refusing overtime. By February 16, only 12 drivers had accepted the government-union offer and rail authorities announced that train cancellations would continue.

A similar deal on overtime was "strongly recommended" by the union last year but rejected by drivers. This is further evidence that the shortage of drivers is a long-term problem that the government has constantly attempted to paper over.

RailCorp spokesperson Helen Willoughby has conceded that if all 1,230 drivers worked the allowable maximum overtime it would only compensate for the work of 116 drivers. She admitted that this would not be enough to "guarantee a full service". The situation is rapidly worsening with 10 drivers retiring every month.

One of the main reasons for the driver shortage is cost cutting. It costs less to press-gang drivers into doing excessive amounts of overtime than to recruit, train and pay new drivers. The shortage was compounded by the breakup of the State Rail Authority in 1996 into four separate entities to facilitate future privatisation.

The management of each sector was under strict instructions to cut costs and return dividends to the government. This meant that insufficient funds were spent to upgrade infrastructure and recruit and train staff. Instead, these essential areas were hacked back to return profits to the Treasury.

One estimate puts the flow of revenue to the government from rail at about \$271 million since the carve-up of the old

rail authority. The Rail Access Corporation that controlled the rail tracks, for example, returned about \$20 million to the government in its first year of existence, \$61 million in 1997-98 and \$53 million in 1998-99.

The split-up also directly affected driver numbers for passenger trains because in the past many had been recruited from the freight services, which are now run by Freightcorp, a fully privatised company. This corporation is anxious to retain its trained drivers, rather than see them transfer to the urban rail service.

Faced with hosting the Olympic Games in 2000, former transport minister Carl Scully attempted to patch up the driver shortage by instituting a shorter training course for train guards to become drivers. The temporary fix did nothing to resolve the underlying problem and by 2002 the shortage was so acute that Scully was forced to “postpone” the introduction of a revised timetable because of the lack of drivers.

The government claims it instituted new health checks on drivers and other key rail staff out of concern for public safety. In fact, the belated action was a damage-control exercise following last month’s release of the report into the Waterfall train disaster in January 2003. Seven people died in the crash, including driver Herman Zeides.

The inquiry found that the driver had suffered a heart attack while at the controls but the emergency “dead man” braking system on the Tangara passenger train failed to work. It exonerated Zeides and blamed the management of the former State Rail (now RailCorp) for ignoring expert warnings that the so-called failsafe brake was defective. The report also criticised State Rail’s medical checks on operational staff as “inadequate” for failing to detect Zeides’ heart condition.

About two weeks ago, rail authorities suddenly announced medical examinations for all key staff and in an entirely bureaucratic and unplanned manner began dragging in older and overweight drivers for check ups. This left the remainder facing demands to work even greater amounts of overtime.

Excessive amounts of overtime can affect a driver’s ability to perform his duties safely and could therefore contribute to further train crashes and loss of life. The Waterfall inquiry report slammed rail management for enforcing rostering that “ignored the dangers of fatigue”.

As for the claim that drivers were deliberately running trains slowly to cause disruption, numerous speed limitations exist throughout the rail system on stretches of unsafe tracks, collapsing rail bridges and disintegrating embankments. These are the legacy of the Carr government’s rundown and outsourcing of maintenance and years of neglect.

Judging by the past record, the backfiring of the latest

government-media campaign will not halt the barrage against drivers and other rail workers. Far from addressing the underlying problems, the Carr government, and its accomplices in the media, will simply try to find new scapegoats. As a string of articles in the *Telegraph* over the past 12 months demonstrates, the collapse of one fabrication has rapidly been followed by the invention of a new one.

In the wake of the Waterfall disaster, the newspaper promoted claims by former minister Scully that the crash was probably caused by “onboard human failure,” insinuating that it was the responsibility of the dead driver or the train’s guard. It then ran headlines charging drivers with sabotaging the deadman brakes by jamming them with flagsticks. The only evidence was a report that a government-hired “expert” had detected a gummy substance under the consoles of some trains.

When drivers began to speak up in the Waterfall inquiry and expose the management’s refusal to act on reported safety concerns, including problems with Tangara braking systems, the *Telegraph* accused drivers of endangering safety by reading while on duty. The “evidence” was a sneak photo showing a small amount of reading material lying on the consul of a train.

After the release of the Waterfall report, the newspaper highlighted an announcement by RailCorp of a “four-week inspection blitz” and applauded its threats to sack any driver found “tampering with crucial safety equipment”. The pretext for blitz was the discovery on a single train of a piece of cardboard in the side of a deadman brake pedal to stop it rattling, a common feature with older trains.

The *Telegraph*’s proprietors are themselves deeply implicated in creating the rail crisis, having been in the forefront of demanding that the Carr government cut social spending, slash costs and open up government enterprises, such as public transport, for private investment and exploitation.

Far from vilification, the train drivers deserve to be saluted for standing up to the government, the union and their media accomplices, and attempting to highlight the dangerous state of the NSW rail system.



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