

Australia: Fatal train accident highlights infrastructure decay

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On June 6, a semi-trailer collided with a passenger train, killing 11 people and injuring more than 20 at a level crossing just outside Kerang in rural northern Victoria. The tragedy—and the official response to it—exposes the continuing neglect of public infrastructure and the indifference of successive governments to the lives of ordinary people.

The three-carriage train was only 35 minutes into a four-hour trip south from Swan Hill to Melbourne when the northbound truck struck the side of the second carriage, ripping it apart and stripping all the seats. But for the fact that only 40 people were onboard, the death toll could have been far higher. It is the worst rail disaster in Australia since January 1977, when a bridge collapsed on a commuter train at Granville, in Sydney, killing 83 people.

The accident happened in the early afternoon as the experienced truck driver, Christiaan Scholl, made a weekly round trip of some 2,000 kilometres from Wangaratta in north-eastern Victoria to the South Australian capital, Adelaide. Scholl was badly injured in the crash.

Among local residents, the level crossing is notoriously dangerous. The Murray Valley Highway, a major trucking route, bends just before it intersects at a 45-degree angle with the straight rail track. For a northbound truck, trees obscure the view of a southbound train, and sun glare can exacerbate the lack of visibility. Both the road and rail speed limits—100 and 90 kilometres per hour respectively—allow for considerable speed. Warning bells and flashing lights were reportedly operating at the time of the crash, but there are no protective boom gates to halt road traffic.

In the mid-1990s, a person died when their car was pushed into the path of a train by a truck that failed to stop in time at the very same level crossing. The

crossing was last upgraded in 1968.

Des Gillingham, whose farm is adjacent to the accident scene, told reporters: “It’s a straight road and then you just curve to go over the railway line and that’s when you face the stoplights. Well, it’s too late.... If they leave it the way it is, it’s just going to happen again.”

Since the accident it has been revealed that train drivers have reported 90 “near misses” with vehicles at level crossings in the past 12 months in Victoria, including five close calls at the Kerang crossing itself. The fact that these reports were ignored makes the state Labor government centrally responsible for the deaths and injuries.

Following a visit to the accident scene, Victorian Premier Steve Bracks publicly shed a tear over the terrible loss of life, but was quick to dampen any expectations that his government would take remedial action. He said everyone should await the findings of three separate inquiries, to be conducted by the coroner, police and rail safety agencies, which may take many months.

Transport Minister Lynne Kosky immediately attempted to shift the blame onto the truck driver, preempting the official inquiries. Despite evidence that Scholl failed to see the train and tried unsuccessfully to avert the crash at the last minute, Kosky said: “Some people take risks that they should not take.... They think they can actually beat trains.” Kosky’s spokesperson also claimed an earlier assessment of the level crossing found it to be safe.

Likewise, police chiefs sought to make Scholl the scapegoat. Assistant Police Commissioner Noel Ashby stated: “We could’ve had the Great Wall of China in front of the intersection there and I don’t believe it would have prevented this crash ... it does come back to

driver responsibility.” Just two days after the crash, police charged Scholl, at his hospital bedside, with culpable driving.

In the meantime, the road and railway tracks at Kerang have been patched up and the crossing is again open to road traffic, with trains expected to run again later this week. Thousands of such crossings still exist in Victoria, with the government refusing to convene any overall inquiry into level crossing safety.

The main aim of the extensive national media coverage of the tragedy has been to prevent any critical assessment of its causes. In an editorial, Murdoch’s *Australian* claimed: “Not every accident can be prevented”. Measures to make level crossings safer were dismissed as being too expensive and “even with boom gates, signals and lights, accidents at level crossings will still happen. The sad truth is, death for some people comes suddenly and too soon, and we humans do not have the power to prevent every tragedy.”

Letter writers to newspapers expressed a different view. Stephanie Clarke wrote to the *Age*: “As a civil engineer and having lost five members of my family in a level-crossing accident in 1989, this subject is close to my heart.... I hope that the media will stop blaming reckless truck drivers and start challenging the government to seek realistic and immediate measures to improve safety at level crossings. They do exist and they are affordable.”

Another letter writer, Michael Birch, cited Japanese bullet trains, which have run at speeds of up to 210 kilometres per hour since 1964 without a single non-suicide related fatality, to illustrate the safety levels that are possible.

Numerous concrete proposals have been made over the years—including electronic warning devices, warning lights placed before the actual crossing, solar powered boom gates, roundabouts before crossings, road realignments—none of which the government is considering.

Dangerous rail-road intersections are among the worst symptoms of decades of official neglect of the country’s ancient and decaying infrastructure. Of more than 9,000 level crossings nationally, some 6,000 are “passive”, that is, there are no gates, bells or lights but only signs warning road users to beware. In Victoria, of 2,273 level crossings, just 356 have boom gates and

another 456 have bells and flashing lights only, leaving more than 1,400 passive crossings.

To install boom gates at every level crossing in the state would cost \$1.5 billion. By comparison, construction of Melbourne’s Crown Casino complex cost \$2.7 billion, while the Howard government has spent more than \$3 billion so far on the Iraq war.

Last April, following a disastrous crash between a newly commissioned fast train and a truck carrying slabs of granite at a passive rural crossing at Trawalla, which killed two and injured 41, there were calls for action to upgrade safety at level crossings. In 2004, three people died at a notoriously unsafe level crossing in the outer Melbourne working class suburb of St Albans. The government stated at that time that no overpass would be built because of the expense.

The Department of Infrastructure web site boasts that since 2003, 100 level crossings have been upgraded, 65 receiving boom gates. Much of this work was necessitated by the introduction of faster trains on certain lines. An allocation of \$24 million in this year’s state budget will fund a mere 90 more level crossing upgrades over the next 10 years. On busy and suburban rail lines, overpasses are badly needed to ensure pedestrian safety. These would cost an average of \$20 million each.

At the same time, the gutting of rural train services over the past 30 years, through privatisation and the closure of lines under both Labor and Liberal governments has massively increased the amount of road freight on the road system, creating the conditions for more truck-rail accidents.



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