

Australia: Labor government scapegoats air traffic controllers

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18 August 2008

The Rudd government and Airservices Australia, the body overseeing the country's air traffic control system, are attempting to blame air traffic controllers (ATCs) for increasing numbers of flights by passenger aircraft through unsupervised airspace—a development heightening the chance of mid-air collisions that could cost hundreds of lives.

In June alone there were 98 instances of unmonitored airspace across the country. On July 16, a US Learjet passed within 15 nautical miles of a Jetstar passenger plane southwest of Canberra when a section of airspace on the Melbourne to Sydney route suddenly became unmonitored because of a shortage of ATCs.

A spokesman for the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA), which investigated the incident, admitted the two aircraft “were potentially crossing paths”. An air traffic controllers’ spokesman said that while 15 miles may seem like a lot, planes “are travelling so fast that in some scenarios there can be less than 60 seconds to react and avoid an accident”.

Faced with uncontrolled air space, pilots either have to divert around the area, adding to fuel costs, or rely on a system known as Traffic Information Broadcast by Aircraft (TIBA) that involves using a common radio frequency to establish contact with other planes in the vicinity.

Only days before the Learjet incident, CASA insisted that there was no risk to passengers when pilots relied on TIBA, while at the same time admitting the situation was “less than perfect”. Air traffic controllers, however, contend that some pilots fail to broadcast their presence on the correct frequencies, and many overseas pilots are unfamiliar with the system and do not sufficiently understand the collision avoidance procedures.

An article in the *Australian* on July 15 reported one controller in an online forum saying: “Imagine our worst nightmare, TIBA uncontrolled airspace somewhere in Australia. Two aircraft collide, multiple fatalities.... In the ensuing investigation who would the authorities recommend be indicted on formal charges of reckless abandonment of responsibilities?”

Another comment in the *Courier Mail* on July 23 on the dangers of relying on TIBA said: “One miscalculation, one misunderstood radio message, one garbled transmission and it will end in flames and tears.... Watch then, as politicians from both sides of the political spectrum run for cover.”

Airservices Australia chief executive Greg Russell used an Asia-Pacific Aviation Conference in Sydney last month to claim that “a small number of renegades” among controllers were deliberately

causing service interruptions and closing airspace as part of an undeclared industrial campaign ahead of pending wage negotiations. He further accused controllers of taking “excessive” sick leave.

While the controllers’ collective work agreement expires at the end of this year, their union, Civil Air, has not yet lodged a formal log of claims, issuing only a “vision statement” telegraphing pay increases of between 32 percent and 63 percent over three years. The increases would lift the starting wage of new trainees from just \$35,000 for the first two years of employment to \$52,500, on par with the starting wage in India and the Middle East—the bare minimum needed to attract and retain controllers.

Russell told the conference that during 2006 and 2007 there were only seven incidents when pilots had to fly across unmonitored air space, and there were no wage negotiations during that period. “Since October last year there had been more than 140 service interruptions,” he declared. “You may well ask what’s so different in 2008 and I think the answer is pretty obvious.”

Russell also dismissed controllers’ insistence that the service failures resulted from chronic staff shortages, claiming the present staff shortfall was only 17 controllers. “Is it a critical shortage? No. But it can sound very persuasive when it’s being talked up in a year of wage negotiations.”

Federal Transport Minister Anthony Albanese waded in with similar unsubstantiated comments. Speaking on Brisbane radio station 4BC, Albanese declared: “It is a fact that Civil Air, the air traffic control union, is engaged in industrial negotiations at the moment over a wages agreement. At the same time, there appears to be a situation whereby you’ve had a number of people not turning up for work in order to create a situation which causes some difficulty.”

Russell’s and Albanese’s statements, a combination of innuendo and deceit, are motivated by interrelated issues. First, they are anxious to cover up years of neglect and lack of forward planning, a situation the Labor government has no plan to address.

At the same time, the Rudd government is demanding “wage restraint” to drastically slash costs across government agencies. The duo’s attack amounts to a pre-emptive strike to set public opinion against the controllers ahead of the pending pay dispute. Russell has already dismissed the controllers’ pay proposal as “clearly not realistic” while pointing to the recent deal by the pilots’ union and Qantas for just 3 percent a year.

Russell also said the agency would “improve airspace

management, as well as tackling restrictive union practices in areas such as rostering and absenteeism”. Put plainly, the aim is to remove impediments to a more ruthless use of the existing workforce to plug gaps in services.

Airservices Australia is government-owned but was corporatised in 2000 and now wholly financed by charging the airlines for air traffic control (ATC) and other services. In 2000, a spokesman for the agency said “structural changes” were necessary because the agency was “continually trying to find ways to improve our service provision to those customers and to do it in a cost-effective manner”.

By 2003 Airservices had cut 81 controller positions from Sydney, Adelaide and Perth to consolidate “en-route” operations in Melbourne. The number of controllers has not increased over the past four years, despite a substantial growth in air traffic. Today, with airlines facing escalating operating costs and sharp fuel price rises, pressures will mount on Airservices to lower its charges even further.

In a July 29 media release, the Civil Air union branded Russell’s attack on controllers as “baseless and insulting”, adding “there is an acknowledged shortage of air traffic controllers”. It declared the “increasing rate of closures and service reductions” were “symptomatic of a system slowly failing despite the efforts of those that actually provide the services”.

In fact, the system is failing very rapidly. It is only being maintained at all because controllers work excessive amounts of overtime and come to work on their days off. According to the union, staff shortages have led to single controllers “handling multiple pieces of air space alone where risk modelling has already determined a need for two or more controllers”.

The increased rate of incidents corresponds with a restructure by Airservices Australia that commenced in March 2007, with 100 operational ATC supervisors—who were part of air traffic control rosters and assisted with ATC work-load—appointed as front line managers. The majority are now limited to supervisory tasks and are no longer licensed to provide air traffic control, resulting in a sharp decline in the number of qualified people available to cover roster shortfalls.

Russell claimed that the average number of sick days taken was around 15 a year, whereas the national average was around six days. However, according to Airservices’ own figures, controllers take on average 11.15 sick days a year and the figure has remained substantially unchanged over three years. The number of sick days is on par with other workers in demanding shift environments.

No doubt, increasing amounts of overtime and longer shifts result in fatigue, contributing to illness. But sick leave is strictly monitored. Controllers are obligated to provide medical certificates for absences over one day and take full medical examinations for longer periods.

Russell’s claim that the agency is only short 17 controllers is based on the equally dubious claim that there are 972 operational controllers. An internal audit and survey by Civil Air shows that the number of full-performance controllers is 622, part-qualified controllers 102, supervisors and check controllers 29 and trainees 40. The total number of full-time controllers is just 753—more than 200 less than the official figure.

From as early as 2000, Airservices Australia failed to provide for future demand by recruiting and training sufficient numbers of air traffic controllers. Russell himself admitted to the failure in a private letter to an airline, reported in the *Australian* on July 15. Referring to when he first took over as chief executive in 2005, he wrote: “One of the first requests was to see the Airservices’ workforce plan to how the organisation intended to address future resource requirements. There was no such plan available.”

The current situation, arising from years of neglect and cost cutting, is set to worsen. More than 45 percent of the controller workforce is over 45 years of age, with around 25 percent of that number aged over 55 years. The union claims: “Almost 320 operational controllers are within five years of retirement and a minimum of 80 may retire at any time.”

A “revised working plan” announced by Airservices Australia will not address the problem. The organisation plans to recruit only 80 trainees this year, up from just 48 last year, and 100 more in 2009. The union, however, estimates that by 2013, with the forecast growth of air travel, there will be a shortage of 455 controllers. It takes a trainee 18 months to qualify for a licence and only around 55 percent, on average, are successful.

The Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics estimates that passenger numbers will double within two decades. Last year, the number of international passengers arriving and departing from Australian airports rose by 6 percent to almost 23 million, the highest number recorded.

The government’s attack on controllers is indicative of its attitude toward all working people. The ongoing cost-cutting across the aviation industry shows that the crisis afflicting air safety systems will go unaddressed. The scenario of “flames and tears” could well become a grim reality at any moment.



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