

Another fatal train crash in Australia

Peter Byrne
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Just before noon last Sunday, a truck laden with vegetables collided with a metropolitan passenger train carrying 30 passengers at a level crossing in the outer south-eastern Melbourne suburb of Dandenong South. The first two carriages jack-knifed after they derailed and skidded for 200 metres along the ground.

Passenger David Cron, a 43-year-old resident of Cranbourne West, died at the scene. Twelve others were hospitalised, including the 30-year-old train driver, who is in a serious condition with head and leg injuries. The 69-year-old truck driver was unhurt as the trailer was ripped from his prime mover on impact with the train. The toll could have been far higher, as the six-carriage Cranbourne-bound train has the capacity to transport 600 people.

Plumber Mick McGuigan was driving behind the truck. He told the media: “I don’t think he [the truck driver] realised the barrier was down because I was behind him and he’s locked the back brakes and the trailer brakes came on ... Then he realised that he couldn’t stop and he tried to negotiate the barrier.”

The fundamental cause of the accident is the very existence of road vehicle crossings over railway lines in Melbourne. The crossings have led to repeated tragedies.

On November 18, 2008, a 53-year-old woman was killed at the very same Abbots Road crossing when her car was hit by a train. Collisions on the track also occurred in 2006 and in 2001. Near misses were reported by train drivers in 2002, 2005 and 2007.

The serious safety issues at the Abbots Road crossing are well known by locals. A woman who works in an office opposite the track released video she had filmed of a truck and cars driving around closed boom gates to avoid being delayed. She told the media: “We sit there and say ‘it’s only going to be a matter of time before someone dies,’ and unfortunately it has now happened.”

Level crossing predictor technology, aimed at reducing disruption to road traffic, minimises the time that boom gates are lowered by timing the speed of an incoming train as it crosses a circuit at a point on the track. The Cranbourne-bound train involved in the latest disaster is believed to have been travelling close to its speed limit on the section of the track at the crossing of 115 kilometres per hour.

The time lapse between warning lights flashing, the gates descending and a train speeding through is minimal. Video footage taken prior to the November 3 crash showed another large truck crossing the tracks just seconds before the boom gates came down. There is acute pressure on the drivers of large vehicles to make split second judgements. The danger is compounded by the increasing length of freight trucks, which have slower braking times, and the enormous stress on drivers and the excessive hours that they work to meet deadlines.

Across Australia, there are still 9,380 level crossings, of which only 2,649 have “active protection”, such as flashing lights or boom gates. The remainder have nothing other than warning signs.

Across Victoria there are still more than 1,000 level crossings, including 172 in the Melbourne metropolitan area. By comparison, there is only a handful in metropolitan Sydney. Officially recorded near misses reported by train drivers in Victoria rose from 146 in 2010-11 to 170 in 2011-12. Fatalities have also occurred. In October last year, a 15-year-old schoolgirl was killed in St Albans, in Melbourne’s west, after she was struck by a train after she opened security gates at a crossing and attempted to run across the tracks. A woman was killed in another collision in May in Werribee, because her car was stuck on the track by traffic ahead and behind.

Despite its record of accidents, the Abbots Road site ranks at 144 among Melbourne level crossings—or

among the safest. Victorian Premier Ted Baillieu attended the crash site but immediately ruled out any grade separation, such as a bridge or an underpass, because it would cost too much. He told the press: “We would all love to have level crossings eliminated. I don’t think anyone would suggest otherwise, but we have to be realistic about it.”

Baillieu put the entire blame on the truck driver. Before any investigation into the circumstances of the disaster had even commenced, he declared: “What we do know about this tragedy is that the semi-trailer involved went through the boom gates ... when the boom gates were down, the bells were ringing, the lights were flashing and there were stationary vehicles at the level crossing, on the other side of the crossing.”

Marc Marotta, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union divisional secretary, backed Baillieu’s response. “Certainly there are some [crossings] around the state we’d like to see made safer, but this one had more than adequate safety warnings,” he said.

The attempt to make the tragedy the individual responsibility of the driver is aimed at covering up the role played by successive governments and the trade unions, which have turned a blind eye to the dangers and insisted that people must accept that there is not enough money to pay for critical infrastructure.

Drivers have been repeatedly scapegoated. In 2007, a truck and train collided near the rural town of Kerang, in central Victoria. Eleven passengers died in the worst Australian rail accident since the 1977 Granville disaster in Sydney. Criminal charges were then laid against the truck driver, Christian Scholl, amid sanctimonious claims by Labor transport minister Lynne Kosky that people “take risks that they should not take” trying to cross the track before the train arrived.

The jury in Scholl’s Supreme Court trial, however, returned a not-guilty verdict. The jury agreed with his defence that government inaction was to blame, because repeated safety warnings had been ignored. A train supervisor gave evidence that it was “only a matter of time before a serious accident occurs at this location”.

The official indifference has continued. The 2012 Victorian state budget allocated \$350 million to finance the grade separation of only three of the most dangerous level crossings in Mitcham and Springvale.

The estimated cost of the grade separation of every level crossing in Victoria, which would provide safety while at the same time improving traffic flow and the functionality of the rail system, ranges from \$20 million to \$200 million per crossing. The total investment necessary to resolve the problem would be around \$35 billion.

The federal Labor government allocated \$36 billion for a “Nation Building Program” on road and rail infrastructure between 2008 and 2013. However, less than 0.5 percent of this fund, \$150 million, was allocated to upgrade just 300 crossings to “active” status. In contrast, billions were set aside for transport infrastructure aimed at boosting exports, especially for the major mining transnational companies. Government budget documents explain that this is intended to “help drive Australia’s long-term productivity and international competitiveness”.

This situation underscores the fact that under the profit system the social needs of the population, including basic issues of public safety, are subordinated to the financial interests of the wealthy elite.



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