

Australia: Sydney's train system in a shambles

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12 January 2018

Sydney commuters have been brought face to face with the dysfunction of the city's railway network, with unprecedented delays, service cancellations and overcrowding this week.

The shambolic state of the main transit system in Australia's most populous city has revealed a broader infrastructure crisis, resulting from decades of funding cutbacks and privatisation measures by successive state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

Disruptions to regular services started on Monday, before the train network ground to a halt on Tuesday, leaving thousands stranded.

Virtually every scheduled service was late or cancelled. By Tuesday afternoon, eight out of ten services passing through Central Station, the network's hub, were not running to any timetable. Information boards were left blank, with no departure or arrival times.

Transport for NSW (New South Wales) issued alerts asking commuters to avoid "non-essential" train trips and to catch buses. Platforms at Central and other city stations were shut due to massive overcrowding, with police and transit officials blocking commuters trying to reach trains.

Services that did operate were repeatedly delayed on route, with passengers forced to stand in crowded carriages for lengthy periods, as drivers waited for signals to clear.

People travelling from the city to the inner-west suburb of Campsie, normally a 25-minute trip, were stuck on trains for up to an hour and 45 minutes. Workers travelling between the central business district and Parramatta, a major centre in western Sydney, reported that a one-hour round trip, during the morning and evening peak hours, took up to nine hours.

The meltdown caused many commuters to be late for work. Others reported missing flights that cost hundreds of dollars, having childcare crises and being unable to attend important functions. Disruptions to services continued on Wednesday and Thursday.

The NSW state Liberal-National government attributed the crisis to thunderstorms on Tuesday. Transport Minister Andrew Constance arrogantly blamed an "act of God." At the same time, he sought to scapegoat train drivers, claiming that many were on leave or called in sick. The immediate trigger, however, appears to have been an overhaul of train timetables introduced last November.

The government had touted the timetable changes as a major improvement, claiming there would be more than 700 extra services during weekdays. In reality, the changes involved no expansion of staff numbers or trains. They sought to squeeze more out of an already over-stretched system.

A Sydney Trains briefing, made public under a freedom of information request last December, warned that the new timetable would result in "cumulative and irrevocable" delays. Trains would operate at "track capacity," leaving "no opportunity for diversions or recovery from incidents."

The changes also would result in "reduced fleet maintenance windows," under conditions of "increased demand on maintenance as [the] fleet [is] doing more kilometres."

Government figures cited by the *Sydney Morning Herald* showed that half the state's fleet of electric trains is more than 20 years old, with 33 percent in use for over three decades.

The briefing further undermined claims of an expansion of services. It noted that passengers travelling to Westmead station, in the city's western

suburbs, would have their peak-hour morning services halved, and this would impact on people travelling to Westmead Hospital. The briefing tallies with reports from commuters, especially in working class areas of western and southwestern Sydney, that the timetable change has resulted in fewer services.

Workers have hit back at claims that the delay was the fault of train drivers.

One Twitter user, who said her brother is a train driver, posted on Tuesday: “Sydney trains have been severely understaffed for a year. Not enough new drivers and train crews have been trained during this period as a cost-saving measure by the current government and management.”

The results of a ballot of Sydney Trains members of the Rail, Bus and Tram Union (RBTU) on protected industrial action are due out today. Railway workers are threatening to strike and implement work bans for a 6 percent per annum pay rise amid sharply increasing workloads.

Transport Minister Constance declared this week he would “stare down” the drivers. He said the government would refuse to budge from its 2.5 percent pay rise cap for public servants, which barely keeps pace with the inflation rate.

The government is conducting a broader assault on public transport. It is constructing a “Sydney Metro” train service, beginning with a North West Rail Link and “Metro” servicing of the Sydenham to Bankstown line.

Critics have noted that the proposed single-deck “Metro style” trains cannot integrate with the existing network. Analysis by four former rail executives, released under a freedom of information claim last month, said the Metro would cause the “degradation of the robustness and reliability” of the system and lead to “the total network becoming gridlocked and unworkable.”

The Metro project is a “public-private partnership,” enabling massive cash handouts of public funds to corporations. In 2014, Northwest Rapid Transit, a consortium of engineering and infrastructure corporations, received a \$3.7 billion government contract for the bulk of the Metro construction—the largest “public-private” grant in the state’s history. Beginning in 2019, the Metro fleet will be operated by private companies, including MTR Corporation, John

Holland and UGL Rail.

The opposition Labor Party and the RBTU have denounced the government’s privatisation moves, covering up the program implemented by previous Labor governments.

From 1995 to 2011, the state Labor government, assisted by the unions, divided up and corporatised rail assets and operations, in preparation for privatisation. Dozens of rail facilities, including maintenance workshops and track repair divisions, were closed and thousands of jobs were cut.

Labor also sold off the state’s electricity distribution network and expanded the private operation of bus and other transport services.

This program has deepened under Liberal-National governments since 2011, with thousands of rail and other public service jobs slashed. Ferry services were privatised in 2012, and the government wants to sell off what remains of the rail network.

The Sydney transport crisis illustrates the incompatibility of fundamental social needs, with the insatiable profit demands of the corporate and financial elite, advanced by every government, and enforced by the unions.

While billions of dollars are squandered on criminal wars and military intrigues, public planning is wholly subordinated to the dictates of property developers and other businesses, and official political discussion is dominated by demands for ever-greater cuts to healthcare, education, welfare and other vital social spending.

Basic tasks in a complex mass society, including ensuring decent train services that run on time, require rational planning geared to meeting the needs of working people. This means the struggle for a workers’ government and socialist policies, including placing the banks and corporations under public ownership, injecting billions of dollars into social infrastructure, and placing society’s resources under the democratic control of the working class.



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