

Australia: Continuing chaos on Sydney's trains

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The dysfunction of Sydney's railway network has continued this week, with widespread delays, service cancellations and warnings that erratic timetable changes and overcrowding will be the "new normal" in 2018.

Almost 40 peak hour services were cancelled yesterday, leaving thousands of commuters late for work, and resulting in more overcrowding and confusion. Yesterday's disruptions followed at least 92 service cancellations on Saturday, including on the Northern, Western and North Shore lines.

The latest chaos comes after the city's entire rail network broke down last Tuesday. Many thousands of people were left stranded amid dozens of cancellations and delays, with the bulk of train services operating without any scheduled arrival or departure times. Platforms at Central and Town Hall stations, two key hubs, were shut due to overcrowding. Passengers reported taking almost two hours on journeys that previously took 25 minutes.

Service outages continued in Australia's largest city last Wednesday and Thursday.

The New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National government responded to widespread public anger by labelling last Tuesday's crisis an "act of God," because storms contributed to the delays. The government also blamed train drivers and staff, declaring that unusually large numbers had taken approved holiday leave or called in sick.

Figures from Sydney Trains' annual reports, published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* yesterday, however, show that years of job cuts have forced train drivers and station staff to take on ever-greater workloads.

Sydney Trains, which began operations in 2013, was formed through the break-up of the previous state

authority, Railcorp. The move followed decades of restructuring by both Labor and Liberal-National governments, aimed at corporatising rail assets to slash costs and prepare for their privatisation.

Sydney Trains was created as part of a further restructure, which included the establishment of Transport for NSW, an umbrella entity tasked with contracting out all public transport services, beginning with non-core services, such as administration. At least 750 railway jobs were destroyed across the state.

According to the Sydney Trains annual reports, there were just 22 more Sydney train drivers and guards last year compared to 2013-2014, when train crew staff numbered 2,469. This was despite a rapidly growing urban population, and increased demands on train services. The figures do not include the hundreds of sackings that took place when Sydney Trains was established.

The reports also show that the number of station staff has been slashed by 26 percent, from 1,918 in 2013-14 to 1,408 last financial year, as Opal cards were introduced and paper tickets phased out.

In addition to maintaining station infrastructure, station staff previously assisted passengers, provided information and took action during emergencies. The chaos last Tuesday was undoubtedly exacerbated by the substantial transfer of these functions to automated announcement systems.

The job cuts have intersected with a drive by the government and Sydney Trains to squeeze more out of an already over-stretched network. Last November, the government introduced a new timetable, claiming it would provide about 700 more weekday services.

A briefing to Sydney Trains, made public this month, warned that the new timetable would result in "cumulative and irrevocable" delays, along with

substantial maintenance issues on the city's aging train fleet. Nevertheless, the timetable was rolled out.

Opposition is growing among rail staff to the increased workloads and poor conditions they confront. Last Friday, 84 percent of Sydney Trains staff, including drivers and train guards, who cast a ballot voted in favour of industrial action in an ongoing dispute over a new workplace agreement. In addition, of those who voted, some 73 percent of NSW Trains' drivers, who work outside the city, registered support for an industrial campaign.

The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) announced an indefinite overtime ban by Sydney Trains staff beginning on January 25. The union has requested a 6 percent annual pay rise for drivers. The government has repeatedly rejected the call, citing an annual cap of 2.5 percent on public sector wages rises that barely keeps pace with the rate of inflation.

In addition, workers are reportedly fearful that the government's new Metro rail service, a "public-private partnership" set to commence in 2019, foreshadows the complete privatisation of the state rail network and huge job cuts.

The RTBU, however, is anxious to strike a deal with management. The union has engaged in backroom negotiations for weeks with Sydney Trains, while publicly calling for a "fair and reasonable" agreement to be struck. Such a deal would facilitate the ongoing, pro-business overhaul of train services. The union is only calling for employees "affected by restructure" to be given "priority assessment" for employment.

The RTBU is working closely with the Labor Party and agitating for the return of a state Labor government, claiming it would be committed to decent public transport.

In reality, Labor, with the crucial assistance of the unions, spearheaded the corporatisation of the rail system from 1995 to 2011. The Labor government of Premier Bob Carr sold off the state's rail freight services, and oversaw the destruction of dozens of rail facilities, including track repair divisions and maintenance workshops.

Since 2011, under Liberal-National state governments, the RTBU has continued to enforce the destruction of thousands of jobs across the rail network and public transport system.

The union did nothing to oppose the 2012

privatisation of Sydney ferry services, and has supported the corporatisation of public transport. Last December, it issued a statement "cautiously welcoming" a state government contract with Keolis Downer, a private operator, to run Newcastle's bus, ferry and light rail services.

The same month, the union struck an enterprise agreement covering the State Transit Authority, which runs NSW buses, at the same time as 200 jobs were axed in the department's salaried division, including office and clerical workers.

The record makes clear that the union, alongside successive Labor and Coalition governments, is responsible for the running down of public transport, and its subordination to the profit interests of big business, which are the chief causes of Sydney's rail chaos.



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