Australian rail accident causes 16 injuries

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A train crash in Sydney's northwest yesterday morning injured 16 people, including the driver and two other rail staff members. When the train failed to stop at the end-of-the-line at Richmond Station on the outskirts of the New South Wales (NSW) state capital, the driver reportedly applied the emergency brakes, slowing but not halting the train before it hit the crash barriers.

Three helicopters and dozens of ambulances were on the scene, along with NSW Fire and Rescue teams. Fifteen people were sent to hospital, with most discharged yesterday evening. Several continued to receive treatment; the most seriously injured being a 21-year-old man with a suspected broken femur and an elderly woman with a fractured collarbone.

The Australian Transport Safety Bureau, Office of Transport Safety (both government agencies) and an independent body corporate, the Office of National Rail Safety Regulator, were ordered to investigate the incident.

In typical fashion, even before the inquiries have begun, the corporate media is seeking to create the conditions to scapegoat the driver for the crash and block any broader discussion of the role of governments, present and past, for the rundown of public transport, including the Sydney rail network.

An article published overnight in the *Australian* declared: "Early inquiries seem to suggest driver error and not mechanical failure was the cause of the accident but authorities have cautioned that the investigation into the incident is in its infancy."

The article continued: "A senior official briefed on the accident told the *Australian* the driver had failed to apply the normal brake in time to stop the train. Instead, the official said, it appeared the driver, Ritesh Mittal, panicked and, apparently convinced he was about to crash the vehicle, applied the emergency brake, slowing the train but not stopping it in time to avoid a crash."

The driver has been employed by Sydney Trains for nearly a decade and, according to a union official, is "extremely knowledgeable" and "well-liked by everyone."

At this stage, it is not possible to identify the exact causes for the crash. However, it took place amid increasing evidence of chaos in the Sydney rail network, with drivers being forced to work onerous hours and maintenance being compromised.

The crash occurred on the same morning as closed-door negotiations between government ministers and Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and other union officials sought to reach a sell-out agreement to avert a strike. Train workers, angry over pay and conditions, voted overwhelmingly earlier this month in favour of industrial action, as part of a dispute over a new enterprise bargaining agreement, prompting the RTBU to call a stoppage of 9,000 workers on January 29. The union leadership is now doing everything in its power to make sure the strike does not proceed.

The unions have contributed to the dangerous conditions facing rail staff and commuters. The RTBU and its predecessors have signed enterprise agreements with successive governments, providing for regressive restructures, mass job cuts and the erosion of working conditions.

An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on January 9 pointed out that a timetable overhaul of Sydney Trains last November had led to increased workloads for train drivers and other staff and "smaller windows" for important maintenance work on tracks, due to increased services and staffing cuts.

The result has been to shorten breaks between shifts, worsen the "potential for slips, trips, and falls due to [the] interchange increase" and to make overtime the norm. It is common for drivers to work 12 hours with one break.

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This has created the conditions for increased accidents. Speaking with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation last week, train driver Van Cremer, 66, said: “The timetable is doable if we have enough drivers but they’re giving us very tight margins to get to the next train—sometimes six minutes.”

Cremer referred to the pressure on drivers reaching their next train—particularly when drivers had to make their way through passengers gathered on crowded platforms. “Pressure can often lead to mistakes, it leads to errors like going past signals, overshooting platforms, things like that which we get punished for,” he said.

With the crash in Richmond occurring less than a week later, Cremer’s comments—reflecting the concerns of rail workers generally—unfortunately have been vindicated.

Sydney Trains and the government have ignored the warnings of rail staff. Sydney Trains head Howard Collins sought to blame the issues of recent delays and train cancellations on “higher than expected instances of drivers and guards off sick.”

Andrew Constance, transport minister in the state Liberal-National government, has branded warnings by train drivers about excessive overtime as “a cynical attempt in the dark arts of union activism.” He threatened train drivers who complain of fatigue, saying more drivers were starting soon, so “if you don’t want to work, well we’ve got people about to arrive who can fulfil your duty.”

It is becoming increasingly clear that the deteriorating conditions for rail workers are creating serious hazards due to fatigue, maintenance issues and lack of staffing, placing both workers and commuters at risk. Successive governments, far from reversing the deterioration, have scapegoated individual train drivers for incidents like the one at Richmond Station yesterday.

The last major accident in the Sydney rail network was a tragic crash outside Waterfall Station, about 40 kilometres south of the city centre, in 2003. A train derailed at high-speed, resulting in the death of the 53-year-old driver Herman Zeides and six passengers. Despite testimonies from other drivers and evidence pointing to mechanical issues with the Tangara-class trains, the then NSW Labor government and the corporate media claimed that Zeides was at fault and that rail drivers in general engaged in unsafe practices.

In January 2004, an official inquiry blamed the railways management for the accident and exonerated Zeides, concluding that he had “not contributed to the accident through recklessness or carelessness.”

The crash yesterday morning, whatever the precise causes, is a fresh warning that the worsening conditions in the rail network will lead to new tragedies.

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