Australia: Lack of safety system contributed to injuries in rail crash

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Sixteen people were injured last Monday when a suburban train crashed into a barrier in Sydney's northwest. While the incident is still under investigation, the failure of successive governments in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) to install proper safety systems was a contributing factor.

Rail Safety Consulting Australia director Phillip Barker told the *Daily Telegraph* last week that, had an Automatic Train Protection (ATP) system been installed in the Waratah-class train, the injuries caused by the accident at the end-of-the-line Richmond Station might have been prevented.

Barker, who previously worked for the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) as a rail safety investigator, said: "It's likely an ATP would have been able to reduce the seriousness of the impact. There still would have been contact [with the barrier], but it's more likely people would have just lost their footing rather than being slammed into the walls."

Despite this, Gladys Berejiklian, the premier in the NSW Liberal-National coalition government, dismissed concerns about the safety of passenger trains in the state, saying: "If we thought there was any threat to any other service we would have taken action."

Sydney Rail head Howard Collins also waved away unease over the safety of the trains. "There's no indication there's anything wrong in terms of the Waratah fleet," he said. "Let me make that clear. We're now working with the safety investigators."

Investigations are being conducted by the government-run ATSB, Office of Transport Safety and an independent body corporate, the Office of National Rail Safety Regulator.

While ongoing inquiries have yielded no conclusions, the government and corporate media immediately suggested that the train driver was to blame for the crash. Without offering any evidence, media reports stated that "initial investigations" into the crash suggested "no mechanical fault" and "likely driver error."

Barker later spoke to the WSWS. He commented that the results of inquiries "depend on who is doing the investigation. The ATSB won't be saying that, but the owner of the train system might." Certainly, "after one or two days of investigations, it is not possible to rule it [mechanical failure] out or rule it in."

Asked to explain the ATP system, Barker said it is used in sections of track where the train is required to "meet a speed target," such as on curves and at platforms. If a driver, for whatever reason, is "unable to maintain the correct speed," the ATP will first alert the driver and, if no action is taken, initiate an emergency brake to meet the required speed. "They are good systems used all around the world," he said.

The last major incident on NSW railways was the 2003 disaster at Waterfall, 40 kilometres south of Sydney, that resulted in the death of the driver, 53-year-old Herman Zeides, and six passengers.

Despite testimonies from other drivers and evidence pointing to mechanical issues, the then NSW Labor government and the media declared that Zeides was at fault and that rail drivers in general engaged in unsafe practices.

A Special Commission of Inquiry (SCOI) investigation report into the accident, released in 2005, blamed the railway's management for the disaster. It absolved Zeides, concluding that he had "not contributed to the accident through recklessness or carelessness."

The report made 177 recommendations to the state government and rail operators. Two recommendations remain open, including Recommendation No. 32 which

stated: “RailCorp [the NSW rail network owner] should progressively implement, within a reasonable time, level 2 automatic train protection.” The report pointed out that the technology was already in use in Western Australia.

Level 2 ATP, according to Phillip Barker, uses radio signals rather than track-side signals to activate the ATP system. He added that such systems were installed in the state of Queensland in 1998.

The NSW government only began implementing ATP systems almost a decade after the SCOI report on the Waterfall disaster and is not due to complete the roll-out in the Waratah fleet until December 2019.

Barker also told the WSWS that, while it was difficult to determine early in the investigation, the issue of driver fatigue “was certainly something which should be looked at.” Train drivers in the Sydney rail network are frequently asked to work long shifts in order to cope with the lack of staff.

Barker pointed out: “You have to remember: The driver’s just part of the system. Driver error is a result, not a cause. There are a lot of things further up the line which have to be put into place. The driver is just the last link in the chain.”

Asked if other measures should be taken to prevent crashes, Barker said: “There are two phases: prevent the likelihood of it occurring, and reduce the impact.” He said ATP devices would lower the chances of crashes, but “other systems such as the buffer could be looked at to reduce the consequences of such incidents.”

There existed “good [buffer] designs these days,” he said. “It’s not a concrete block [as at Richmond Station], but a sort of sliding system.” This system works as a “friction buffer [which] uses a length of rail to slow the train [to a stop].” Such a system might be difficult to implement at Richmond Station because there is not much track between the platform and the buffer. “A concrete block,” he said, “is a pretty absolute method of stopping trains … [and is] not designed for slowing down a runaway train, as in this incident.”

Last week’s crash is a warning that government failures to invest in safety systems, overworked drivers and mounting chaos in the Sydney rail network are setting the stage for new disasters.