

“A disaster waiting to happen”

Two train drivers killed in derailment on Australia’s main interstate line

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A train driver and his pilot died in a horrific accident when the Sydney to Melbourne XPT (express passenger train) derailed 45 kilometres north of Melbourne on February 20. Of the 153 passengers on board, 12 were taken to hospital with non-life threatening injuries, while others were treated nearby.

The death toll could easily have been higher. Five carriages were scattered across rail lines, leaving shaken passengers scrambling from the wreckage. Emergency services called to the scene, north of Wallan station, led injured and confused passengers through the bush to a nearby fuel station where a triage unit was set up in a carpark.

The tragedy occurred on Australia’s main interstate rail line, linking the country’s two largest cities. The XPT was owned by Transport for NSW (New South Wales) and operated by NSW TrainLink, but was running on track controlled by a federal government entity, the Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC).

Due to ongoing signalling and track problems along the Victorian section of track, the experienced XPT driver, 54-year-old John Kennedy from the Australian Capital Territory, took on board a pilot, 49-year-old Sam Meintanis from Castlemaine, Victoria, before crossing the border into Victoria to assist as a safety precaution. This is normal procedure when track conditions change.

The train was 12 hours into its journey, having left Sydney’s Central Station at 7.40 a.m. The derailment occurred near a point where the main line diverged into two, otherwise known as a railroad switch. A week earlier, Victorian train drivers had declared this corridor unsafe due to signal failure and refused to drive through it.

Trains had been going straight through the switch for several weeks. But due to track cleaning on the day of the accident, a circular was issued to drivers of Victoria’s rural rail operator V/Line, a day earlier, warning that trains travelling on that track would be temporarily diverted through the Wallan Loop, with a 15km/h speed limit.

There normally would be electronic signals along the track telling drivers which way switches would be set. But all the electric signals 15km north and south of Wallan had been blacked out and switches were being operated manually after a fire damaged a signalling hut on February 4.

The track and signalling section involved is owned and maintained by the ARTC. Rather than making it a priority to repair the signalling damage, the ARTC put in place a manual system of forms and authorities to move trains through the corridor.

Several passengers told the media the train was accelerating after being held up for some time. This could indicate that the driver and pilot were not aware that the train was to be diverted onto the loop with a speed limit of 15km/h. If the electronic signals were operational, there would have been ample warning.

Rail workers have been left reeling after the deadly incident, especially those in regional towns north of Melbourne. Drivers have complained for decades about poor track quality on the Melbourne to Sydney line, resulting in rough riding, mud holes and speed restrictions.

Driver John Kennedy had emailed his friend with concerns about the line’s safety in the weeks leading up to the crash. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that in an email sent on February 3 to Clive Williams, a

Canberra rail enthusiast and law professor, Kennedy wrote: “[M]y last six Melbourne return trips have been very late or cancelled mainly due to train fault issues, 3 of the six runs I was down to one engine, on another trip I had no speedo.”

Williams told the newspaper: “John said he half expected to be derailed the first few times he went to Melbourne because of the violent sideways movement on some sections of the track. But he assumed the speed limit had been set by engineers who had calculated the safe speed for trains using those sections.”

In 2010, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) TV program “7.30 Report” interviewed train drivers who called the Sydney to Melbourne rail line a “disaster waiting to happen.” The rail line is the busiest in Australia, with XPT services running daily, plus around 30 freight trains.

A driver told the “7.30 Report:” “The way the tracks are at the moment, it is a matter of time before a train derails.” Freight operator Pacific National warned: “There is a high potential for rough track to cause injuries to drivers, damage to locomotives, wagons and loading.”

Engineers and the ARTC agreed that the underlying problem was the mud plains over which the track was built. David Marchant, the ARTC’s CEO in 2010, admitted that the Victorian section of the track, constructed in 1970 using inferior ballast, was not up to standard. Drivers said that in some sections of track the sleepers were invisible due to mud being pushed up when trains drove over them.

Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Transport Minister Michael McCormack on Friday attempted to head off any suggestion that government negligence played a part in the accident. “No authority in Australia would allow a train to travel on an unsafe track,” he said. “That just wouldn’t happen. I know the ARTC monitors these things closely and regularly.”

If this is true, how was it that the ARTC allowed the train to operate on a section of track on which V/Line drivers had refused to drive?

A Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) spokesperson, Luba Grigorovitch, claimed that the derailment may have been avoided if the XPT had operated under Victorian rules, instead of national regulations. V/Line and Metro Trains Melbourne impose an automatic

speed restriction of 25km/h along dangerous areas of track that require a driver to be navigated by a pilot. National rules allow trains to travel at main line speeds.

But if the RTBU, which covers the rail workers, had declared the passing loop unsafe, why did it not instruct its members to refuse to switch trains onto the track, using its legal rights under occupational health and safety laws?

The Victorian Nationals’ deputy leader Steph Ryan claimed that she raised concerns about the rail line with the state Labor Party government days before the crash and after another train was derailed farther up the line in January. In a desperate damage control bid, Victorian Transport Minister Melissa Horne said on Friday the investigation into the incident would be “absolutely comprehensive.”

However, the state government’s Chief Investigator of Transport Safety will lead the inquiry, under delegation from the federal Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB). The ATSB is due to release a preliminary report in about a month, and a final report in 18 months.

Every attempt will be made to cover up the years of budget cuts to transport and dismissal of the numerous warning signs that indicated the poor and dangerous state of Australia’s rail infrastructure.

Despite numerous warnings about the condition of the track, the federal government only awarded a \$235 million contract to upgrade the Victorian section of the Sydney to Melbourne tracks last December. Even if the contract is delivered on time, the upgrade will only be carried out by the middle of next year.



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