

Australia: Sydney light rail suspended for 18 months after serious cracks discovered

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The light rail line serving the inner west of Sydney has been decommissioned for up to 18 months after cracks were found in the wheel arches of the 12 trams operating on the line.

New South Wales (NSW) Transport Minister Rob Stokes announced the suspension on November 5, following an initial one-week shutdown after routine inspections found cracks up to 30 centimetres long.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported this morning that the seven-year-old trams have been out of warranty since at least mid-2017, meaning the state government may be liable for the cost of repairs. Stokes asserted in parliament last month that the NSW public would “not pay one cent toward the costs of rectification.”

The significant outage comes as the government marches ahead with its reopening drive urging workers back to their places of employment in the Sydney CBD. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, an average of 30,000 passenger trips were recorded each day.

Commuters herded onto buses replacing the suspended service were initially charged full price, despite the inconvenience and delays. After public outrage demanding free replacement buses, the government instead announced that fares would be halved.

During an inspection by engineers, the tram floors were stripped back, revealing cracks that were seen to move during operation, even on a straight track with no bumps or twists.

Howard Collins, Transport for NSW chief operations officer, claimed the cracks were not considered a safety risk and were unlikely to have injured anybody, but the trams would have eventually had the floor scraping on the ground.

The cracks appear to be the result of a major design flaw in the trams, which are only seven years old. Hundreds of similar Urbos 3 models, built by Spanish manufacturer Construcciones y Auxiliar de Ferrocarriles (CAF), are in service around the world.

West Midlands Metro between Birmingham and Wolverhampton in Britain suspended its services after

similar cracks were discovered in July on CAF Urbos 3 trams. Repairs are expected to take months.

Problems with the CAF Urbos 3 model have also reportedly affected light rail networks in Serbia and France. The same model is used in Canberra, but recent inspections there have not discovered any cracking.

Light rail service was suspended in Newcastle last Thursday, after a mechanical problem was discovered with the city’s Urbos 3 trams. According to Transport for NSW, the stoppage, which ended Monday, was due to a gearbox issue unrelated to the cracks found in Sydney.

The City to Dulwich Hill line carries 10 million passengers a year and is operated by Transdev, as is the newer Randwick and Kingsford light rail line, which uses different rolling stock and is unaffected. Because Sydney’s two light rail systems were not built to the same specifications, trams from the Randwick line cannot be redeployed to the inner west while the repairs are undertaken.

Workers who rely on the inner west light rail service may rightfully ask why these trams are falling apart after just seven years? Serious defects overlooked in the manufacturing of the trams also went undetected for years during routine inspections.

On Monday, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that a Transdev staff newsletter from June 2014, just before the introduction of the now suspended fleet, detailed an increase in safety incidents over the previous three months. The email, which was archived on the company’s website but has since been deleted, said: “Our investigations into what and why these incidents have occurred show that, on many occasions, we’ve put network demand ahead of the safety of our staff and passengers.”

Despite safety concerns, Transdev has grown its transport portfolio in Sydney over the past 20 years to include buses, light rail and ferries as state Labor and Liberal governments alike have handed public transport over to private companies to operate for profit.

Delayed and faulty public transport assets are now the pattern right across Sydney and NSW exposing systemic

problems in the state transport department. This is a symptom of the market-driven slashing of costs in public transport, including all aspects of acquisition, manufacturing and maintenance.

The New Intercity Fleet (NIF) or “Mariyung” trains on order from South Korea have been delayed by 18 months due to production problems, COVID-19 disruptions and safety concerns. This \$2.88 billion acquisition also had design problems, with the trains being too wide for tunnels on the Blue Mountains line, meaning the tunnels had to be modified. The NIF trains were originally slated to be in service by 2019 but are now not expected until mid-2024.

The NIF trains were designed for driver-only operation, with a view to eventually eliminating the role of guards. Transport for NSW claims that the guards will be retained for now, but intends to change their role to “customer service guards,” giving them other duties, while drivers will now have to simultaneously monitor 10 CCTV images of the carriages and platform when arriving and departing from stations. The NIF has not begun carrying passengers because rail workers have refused to operate them due to concerns that this new mode of operation is not safe.

Last week, one of Sydney’s Emerald-class ferries failed a three-metre swell test, due to rudder problems and a broken window in the passenger cabin, raising questions over whether the vessels can safely be used on the Manly route as intended.

Sydney’s new Indonesian-built River-class ferry fleet has also been plagued by design faults, having to undergo substantial remediation to alter the angle of the glass in the wheelhouse. They were supposed to be operating by mid-2020, however the rectified vessels won’t enter service until 2022. The design of these ferries does not allow them to pass under bridges along the Parramatta River while passengers are on the upper deck.

A backlog of maintenance issues across Sydney’s train network, which includes hundreds of kilometres of poor overhead wiring, continues to grow. Sections of the Blue Mountains line are rated as “poor” with “age based corrosion degradation and an increase in defects including the need to prop structures and an increase in low wire locations during hot days.”

Confidential Transport for NSW documents also reportedly show operating expenditure on the city’s train network has remained below the required sustainable level for up to ten years.

NSW Labor opposition leader Chris Minns has used the suspension of the inner west light rail to highlight how imported trams, buses and ferries had cost the state “local jobs.” He has declared that the government should have carried out “local job assessments.” This nationalist line,

echoed by the unions, has nothing to do with improving the quality and safety of public transport and ignores the central issue. Purchasing decisions based on cost-cutting and maximising corporate profit will inevitably lead to poor quality outcomes whether the trams are manufactured in Australia or overseas.

The relentless drive to cut costs is tied up with preparations for the complete privatisation of public transport and other critical infrastructure across NSW. The state Labor Party is entirely on board with this agenda and has spearheaded the privatisation of other state assets, including the electricity network and freight train operations.

NSW Labor oversaw the transfer of most of Sydney’s bus network into the hands of private contractors, during its last period of government. The trade unions have suppressed any struggle against the waves of privatisation and have enforced the continuous erosion of transport workers’ conditions. They also have done nothing to publicise or oppose the many safety issues across the Sydney transport network, instead seeking to ensure that there is no disruption to the private operators and corporatised government departments that oversee them.

The current crisis of Sydney’s public transport infrastructure will not be resolved through a change of government from one capitalist party to another. The privatisation offensive and the resulting crisis can only be opposed through a fight for a workers’ government, which would implement socialist policies including ensuring a high-quality, affordable transport network under full public ownership and democratic workers’ control, operated to meet the needs of society, not the profit interests of big business.



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