

Whistleblowers reveal unsafe conditions on Sydney Metro construction project in Australia

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An October 19 report in the *Guardian* has brought to light a spate of major safety breaches on the Sydney Metro rail construction project over the past six months.

Primarily, the breaches have been revealed by whistleblowers inside Metro management, who told the *Guardian* that the project had “a culture of trying to avoid delay at all costs,” including the safety of workers.

The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) has made a handful of public statements about safety concerns on the multi-billion dollar government-funded project. But the union has not mobilised workers against the dangerous conditions, keeping them on the job in line with the demands of management and the state Liberal-National government in New South Wales (NSW).

One of the most dangerous incidents occurred on July 16, when a “failsafe” mechanism on a 30-tonne flat-top railway trailer failed in an unplanned decoupling. This resulted in the trailer, loaded with equipment, racing for more than 1.5 kilometres through the half-built tunnel between the inner-city suburbs of Marrickville and Waterloo.

Workers told the *Guardian* that the only reason no-one was killed in the incident was that it occurred during a lunch break.

If the coupling mechanism fails, the “failsafe” system is supposed to activate and apply the emergency brake. According to the Office of the National Rail Safety Regulator (ONRSR), the system failed because brakes designed for road trucks had been installed on the trailer.

ONRSR described the July 16 incident as “a breach of a basic train safety principle” and issued a safety alert to all train operators to check their carriages urgently. The regulator also ordered an immediate audit of all rail equipment used by Sydney Metro.

ONRSR’s response amounts to little more than damage control. The fact that such a basic and potentially lethal safety breach could occur on a high-profile government-funded project raises the question of why such audits are not

being carried out routinely.

The July 16 breach followed a string of incidents earlier in the year that should have served as a warning for management and the regulator that greater vigilance was needed on safety.

- In February, two major collapses occurred during demolition work being carried out at a car park in Parramatta, as part of the Metro West section of the project.

- On June 21, an escalator being installed at the project’s new station at Martin Place in central Sydney fell four floors and broke through a wall. ETU NSW secretary Allen Hicks told 2GB Radio, “If it had’ve happened 20 minutes earlier we’re probably talking about fatalities.”

- On June 9, a labourer working for a contractor at the Pitt Street site was seriously injured when a personnel hoist failed and he was forced to jump clear. He fell nine metres, breaking his leg and pelvis. The ETU alleges that the worker had not been properly trained to operate the hoist.

- On July 2, three large rail trucks lost control in a tunnel on the project and crashed into one another. The incident was reportedly caused by wet tracks preventing traction and by “non-compliant” service brakes.

The response of Metro management to the life-threatening incidents has been to downplay their severity. Management denied there was any risk to worker safety from the two onsite collapses in February, even though the state safety body SafeWork NSW issued one prohibition notice and one improvement notice. The company claimed no workers were at risk because exclusion zones were in place.

Following the July 16 incident, Metro shrugged off calls for an independent investigation, declaring safety was the company’s “top priority” and that the project has a “lost time from injury” rate that is well below Safe Work Australia’s industry benchmark.

However, a whistleblower told the *Guardian* there was constant “pressure to downgrade the seriousness of safety issues,” in order to avoid the requirement to immediately

report them to SafeWork, which would possibly cause holdups to the project.

The whistleblower explained that the July 16 incident should have been considered a Category A event. This would have required an immediate call to the safety regulator and a visit to the site by inspectors to gather evidence—a protracted process that would have resulted in work stoppages. Instead, management registered it as Category B, requiring only that it be reported within 72 hours.

In a shocking allegation regarding this practice, the whistleblower told the *Guardian* that the death of a man on July 6 had initially been recorded as a “minor” incident of a worker feeling “unwell.”

A spokesperson for SafeWork NSW confirmed that “a worker died in the Sydney Metro tunnels at Barangaroo of a heart attack. The worker was reported as feeling unwell by Sydney metro.” A SafeWork inspector attended the site on the day and ruled out strenuous work, poor air quality and electrical work as causes of the man’s death.

The ETU told the *Guardian* that workers at the site were unable to quickly access an emergency defibrillator because it was in a locked box requiring a code. While management disputes this claim, it admits that more defibrillators have been installed in the tunnels since the man’s death. SafeWork NSW has stated that it has not been contacted by either management or the union about access to defibrillators on the site.

No further investigation has been carried out, and the death has been almost entirely covered over, with silence from the unions, management and the government. With the exception of the October 20 *Guardian* article, the corporate media has been equally quiet. The ETU did not respond to inquiries from the *World Socialist Web Site* about the incident.

This expresses the complete indifference to workers’ lives of the corporate media and political establishment, including the unions and SafeWork NSW. The coverup of this death and the numerous potentially lethal safety breaches reveals the extent to which all of these organisations will go to prevent disruption to the project.

The deeply unpopular NSW Liberal-National government of Premier Dominic Perrottet is facing a state election in March next year and has considerable political capital invested in the Sydney Metro project.

Pointing to the government’s political motives, Transport Minister David Elliott has declared that the opening of the north-west stage of the project is “a priority.” Speaking in May, Elliott tried to head off the obvious conclusions that could be drawn from this by adding: “I don’t want anyone to think we are cutting corners or progressing work just to

get a vote out of it.”

The privately-operated Metro rail system is being expanded to include 31 metro stations and over 66 kilometres of track by 2024, with further development planned through the end of the decade. It is Australia’s largest current public transport project.

The expansion of the fully-automated system is being wielded against rail workers, who are in an 18-month enterprise bargaining dispute with the government over wages, job security and passenger safety. This was sharply expressed in late August, when Perrottet and Elliott used a press event commemorating the completion of one section of the project to threaten to tear up workers’ enterprise agreements, slashing wages and conditions, if limited industrial action on the rail network continued.

A union representative told the *Guardian* that the safety issues exposed were, “beyond alarming, they are an emergency.” But the reality is that the ETU and the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union have allowed unsafe conditions to exist on the Metro project and aided the management coverup by keeping workers on the job, suppressing any organised mobilisation in opposition to the safety violations.

The unions have carried out this role of an industrial police force, throughout the construction industry and more broadly, for decades. As well as enforcing the destruction of jobs, wages and conditions, the unions have served to shut down workers’ opposition to governments tearing down safety regulations and the role of official “safety” agencies as nothing more than a rubber stamp for big-business developers.

Workplace safety cannot be entrusted to the unions or the government safety regulators, which serve to cover up the underlying cause of dangerous working conditions, the subordination of workers’ health and lives to the interests of corporate profit. The enforcement of safety standards must be in the hands of those most directly impacted—workers on the job.

The fight for workplace safety, as well as decent wages and conditions, on the Sydney Metro project and throughout industry, requires that workers establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to fight for their own interests, including their health and lives.



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