

Australia: Sydney rail network brought to a standstill by failure of “obsolete” system

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Leaked government documents have emerged this week, revealing that the total breakdown of Sydney’s passenger railway network on March 8 was caused by the failure of a system known for at least a year to contain obsolete components.

An estimated 250,000 workers and students were left stranded last Wednesday afternoon in Australia’s most populous city. The entire state-owned city and suburban passenger rail network was shut down for 90 minutes after the Digital Train Radio System (DTRS) failed at 2:45 p.m.

The DTRS is the means of communication between train drivers, guards, signallers and the centralised Rail Operations Centre (ROC).

Commuters were advised to find alternative transport, but this was in short supply. Some queued for hours at bus and light rail stops, while others tried to use ridesharing services to get home.

Under Uber’s profiteering “surge pricing” model, fares soared, in some cases by more than 1,000 percent. Passengers returning to working-class suburbs in Sydney’s outer reaches were most sharply affected. While the average cost of a five-kilometre ride from North Sydney to the CBD rose from \$20 to \$50, social media users reported fares of several hundred dollars to travel from the city to Blacktown or Mount Annan.

While trains began running again shortly after 4 p.m., passengers continued to face major delays and overcrowding throughout the evening. Altogether, some 3,000 services were affected.

According to the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH), Transport for New South Wales (TfNSW), the corporatised government agency responsible for mass transit and roads, issued a report early last year, warning that the DTRS “components are obsolete” and the system had been “identified as a priority.”

However, TfNSW denied Tuesday that the network switch that failed was among the parts considered “obsolete,” claiming that this only applied to the wireless radio base station components of the DTRS.

The system is supposed to failover to a redundant backup automatically when a fault occurs, but this did not take place for reasons that have not been made clear.

Professor David Levinson, a transport planning expert at the University of Sydney, told the *Guardian* the system was “far from cutting edge” and criticised its “single centralised point of failure.” He said: “For any major infrastructure, redundancy is required for safety and to keep the system operational.”

The SMH reported that TfNSW has ordered a “freeze” on IT

upgrades and halted “any non-essential work on signalling, operational technology and control systems,” in order to lower the “risk of system failures.”

This lends credence to suggestions that last week’s catastrophic failure may have been related to a system update performed days earlier, although Sydney Trains representatives have denied any link.

The “freeze” could well be politically motivated. With a state election less than two weeks away, the Liberal-National government will be hoping that, if nothing is done to disturb the fragile and ageing system, there will not be a repeat of last week’s chaos until after the polls close.

In a further indication that authorities have little confidence in the ongoing reliability of the DTRS, drivers will now be given hand-held radios to use as a backup if the system fails again.

In the week following the shutdown, several unrelated problems have hit the Sydney rail network. On Friday afternoon, overhead powerlines fell onto a train between Revesby and Panania, in the city’s southwest. Passengers were trapped inside the carriages for almost two hours, until rescue workers were able to evacuate them through the driver’s compartment.

The downed powerlines resulted in delays and cancellations across the entire network lasting more than 24 hours. This was exacerbated by a signalling problem at Erskineville, in the inner-west, on Saturday morning.

In an attempt to divert attention from the state government’s responsibility for the meltdown on March 8, Transport Minister David Elliott suggested the failure could have been caused by “industrial sabotage or foreign interference.” This baseless claim, immediately refuted by Sydney Trains management, is reminiscent of the last time the city’s rail network was brought to a complete halt.

On February 21, 2022, Sydney Trains shut down all services, with no warning to passengers or staff, in a provocative attack on workers, who planned to take limited industrial action. Falsely blaming the stoppage on a strike, Elliott denounced workers for “industrial bastardry” and “terrorist-like activity.”

With the March 25 state election only weeks away, the Labor opposition attempted to use last Wednesday’s transport chaos to score points against Premier Dominic Perrottet and the NSW Liberal-National government. Labor transport spokeswoman Jo Haylen claimed “the Liberal government has once again lost control of the train network.”

The reality is that Labor bears equal responsibility for the run-down state of public transport in Sydney. From 1995 to 2011, successive NSW Labor governments closed dozens of rail facilities, including maintenance workshops and track repair divisions, and slashed thousands of jobs. This was part of a broader program to defund and sell-off large sections of public infrastructure, including the state's electricity distribution network and coalmines.

The passenger rail network is the only mode of mass transit in NSW still under public ownership. While there is no evidence of direct plans to sell off the trains, privatisation is being carried out by stealth.

Virtually all expansion and modernisation of Sydney's railways is part of the Metro project, a privately-owned service that uses automated trains, eliminating the jobs of drivers, guards and many station staff.

University of Technology Sydney transport researcher Mathew Hounsell, speaking to the SMH, warned that the heavy rail network was being neglected in favour of the "flashy new metros." He noted, "a program of continuous capital investment is required to keep the city's most important trains running."

As a result of decades of underfunding by Labor and Liberal-National state governments, 45 percent of NSW's passenger trains are more than 20 years old and almost a quarter have been in service for more than three decades.

An internal TfNSW report last year warned that, without an increase in funding, 17 percent of rail track in greater Sydney will fall into poor condition within ten years. The report particularly drew attention to the deterioration of overhead wiring, such as that involved in the Panania incident.

The decimation of public transport in Sydney and throughout Australia could not have been carried out without the complete agreement and collaboration of the union apparatus.

Following the shutdown last week, Electrical Trades Union Secretary Allen Hicks said the Sydney rail network was "an absolute shambles." He continued: "It's time to end the cycle of cuts and outsourcing and rebuild the internal capacity of Sydney Trains."

But it is Hicks and the other bureaucrats who head the rail unions who have ensured that the "cycle of cuts and outsourcing" has proceeded. In one enterprise bargaining period after another, they have shut down strikes and permitted only limited industrial action. The unions have dragged out negotiations until workers begrudgingly accept a rotten sell-out deal.

When workers have refused to capitulate on safety issues, such as the New Intercity Fleet (NIF) modifications, they have been forced to shoulder the cost through real wage cuts and other attacks.

In their latest betrayal of workers, the RTBU and other rail unions rammed through a sell-out enterprise agreement in January. After shutting down workers' demands for strikes and diverting their struggle into a succession of court cases, the union leaders urged workers to approve a real-wage slashing deal.

To overcome workers' opposition, the bureaucrats promoted illusions that the pro-business Fair Work Commission would award a substantial pay rise through arbitration, which would only

begin *after* the agreement was signed. This was a lie from the start. Last week, the industrial tribunal granted rail workers a meagre 1 percent per annum above the existing offer, leaving workers far behind inflation.

Neither a fair deal for rail workers nor a safe, reliable, high-quality public transport system can be achieved through the unions and Labor, which do not represent the interests of workers but those of big business and the banks.

Instead, workers need to form their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, not highly paid union bureaucrats. These committees can lead the fight for passenger and worker safety, as well as real wage increases and improvements to working conditions.

The chaos on Sydney's railways last week is an expression of the fact that capitalism is fundamentally incapable of providing the basic public services needed for society to function.

What is required is a fight for an alternative—workers' governments must be established to implement socialist policies. These include placing all forms of mass transport and other vital amenities, along with the major corporations and banks, under full public ownership and workers' control. Only then can society and the economy be reorganised to serve the interests of the working class, including well-paid jobs for all who want to work and high-quality public transport, rather than the profit demands of the wealthy few.

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