Privatised phone system failure causes deaths in Australia

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People throughout Australia were shocked to learn overnight that at least three people, including an eight-week-old baby, died on Thursday because of a breakdown in the Triple 0 emergency phone system. The disaster was caused by a failure by Optus, one of the country's privatised telecommunications providers.

Optus CEO Stephen Rue held a short snap press conference at 5.30 p.m. on Friday to belatedly announce the breakdown. He provided no details or explanations, other than that an Optus network outage had caused the failure of 600 Triple 0 calls across South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

South Australian police confirmed that two deaths involved a baby boy from Gawler West, 43 kilometres north of Adelaide, the state capital, and a woman from Queenstown, in Adelaide's northwest. A third death occurred in Western Australia, but that person was yet to be identified.

More deaths and serious health outcomes may have occurred. Police in both states were still conducting welfare checks on the people who could not get through to the Triple 0 number. It is now known that the breakdown lasted for 10 hours on Thursday.

There has been no explanation as to why emergency backups did not kick in, as they were meant to, to divert 000 calls to an alternative service provider.

The disaster threw new doubt over the reliability of the Triple 0 emergency system, which is a life-and-death issue, and underscored the human cost of successive governments, both Labor and Liberal-National Coalition, handing over all the essential telecommunications services to corporate operators driven by profit.

Emergency services and governments said they were unaware of the outage, and its tragic outcomes, until Friday evening. In Western Australia, the St John Ambulance service said Optus did not advise it of a network outage.

"St John WA was not made aware of any issues involving Optus customers' inability to contact triple-0, and has had no briefing from Optus about any outage issues in recent days," it said in a statement.

Labor government ministers, federal and state, tried to go into damage control. The Albanese government's Communications Minister Anika Wells said: "This is incredibly serious and completely unacceptable." South Australian Premier Peter Malinauskas declared: "I have not witnessed such incompetence from an Australian corporation in respect to communications worse than this." He said it was "reprehensible."

But this is not the first time an Optus service failure has shut down Triple 0 calls. An even worse breakdown occurred in November 2023. At least 2,145 customers could not access Triple 0, and Optus also failed to conduct more than 2,000 welfare checks on people who had attempted to access emergency services.

That 12-hour outage in 2023 collapsed phone and internet services for approximately 10 million customers nationwide, disrupting hospitals, banks, EFTPOS payment systems and train services. Businesses across the country were brought to a halt, unable to receive cashless payments, by what Optus called a "routine software upgrade."

An investigation by the official government regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority said the 2023 Triple 0 outage was not only "preventable" but had the potential for "devastating" consequences.

Yet Optus, a subsidiary of Singtel, the Singaporean-listed communications giant, was only penalised $12 million. That is a drop in the bucket for Optus, which has been valued at around $16 billion, and Singtel, which is valued at more than $50 billion. A formal review commissioned by the Albanese government then made 18 limited recommendations in March 2024 to supposedly prevent further incidents.

Minister Wells admitted last night that six of these recommendations were yet to be fully implemented. "The Australian Government accepted all recommendations from the previous Optus Outage Review and has fully implemented 12 of the 18 recommendations, with the remaining six underway," she said, without providing any detail.

Optus is not alone. Telstra, the country's largest telco, was fined $3 million last December after a reported technical issue at one of its call centres meant that 127 calls to Triple 0 were not transferred to emergency services in March 2024. Another 346 calls were transferred to emergency service using a work-around which did not include the callers' digital location.

Both companies have wider records as well. In 2022, about 9.5 million current and former Optus customers were caught up in a data breach, with personal information including names, dates of birth, phone numbers and email addresses exposed over three days. The personal details of about 10,200 people were subsequently published online.

And just three months before this Thursday's outage, Optus had agreed to pay a $100 million penalty for "unconscionable conduct" after selling its services to hundreds of customers who did not want or need them. The company admitted it had sold products to vulnerable people without any regard for whether they had Optus coverage where they lived. Optus had even pursued some of the customers for debts.

None of these developments can be separated from the fact that both Optus and Telstra have carried out waves of retrenchments and cheap labour outsourcing since being privatised in the 1990s, an assault that began with the trade union-backed Hawke-Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996.

Most recently, Optus eliminated 200 jobs in early 2024, on top of 600 staff reductions in 2023. Last year too, Telstra, announced that 2,800 jobs—9 percent of its workforce—would be slashed by the end of the year, lowering its numbers to less than 29,000. In 1980, before it was privatised, Telstra, then named Telecom, had a workforce of around 90,000.

This deepening offensive has been possible only because the trade union bureaucracies have time and again suppressed and sold out workers' opposition.

Optus began in 1981 as Aussat, a government-owned satellite communications company. In 1991, the Hawke-Keating Labor government sold Aussat to a consortium known as Optus. The sale was coupled with the granting of a telecommunications carrier licence to Optus, which enabled it to establish the country's first corporate-owned telecommunications network and start cut-throat competition with the government-owned Telecom.

This was part of a sweeping privatisation agenda in Australia and internationally. Under Hawke and Keating, Labor also sold off the Commonwealth Bank, Qantas and other major public utilities, while transforming Telecom into Telstra, a profit-making corporation. That laid the basis for the following Howard Liberal-National government to complete the Telstra privatisation over three stages, between 1997 and 2006.

At the time, these selloffs were falsely presented as opportunities for "mum and dad" investors to buy shares in iconic national enterprises. Today, both Optus and Telstra are controlled by huge corporate investment funds that ruthlessly scour the world looking for ever-higher rates of profit.

Last year, Singtel reportedly entered discussions with Toronto-based private equity giant Brookfield to sell Optus in a deal said to be worth at least $16 billion. In the case of Telstra, its dominant shareholders include global financial giants, such as JP Morgan Nominees, Vanguard, BlackRock and State Street.

Thursday's terrible deaths demonstrate the fundamental incompatibility between the basic needs of the population—even for essential telecommunications and emergency services—and the control of society's infrastructure and productive capacity by the capitalist oligarchy.

To reverse the catastrophic subordination of human life to the profit interests of corporate giants, the fight must be undertaken for the socialist alternative, which includes placing public utilities, such as communications, and the major banks and corporations under public ownership and democratic workers' control.