

# Cover-ups continue over fatal failure of emergency phone system in Australia

Mike Head

26 September 2025

Both Optus, the telecommunications firm directly involved, and the Albanese Labor government are trying to deny culpability, both immediate and longer-term, for a 13-hour breakdown in Australia's triple-zero emergency phone system on September 18.

More than a week on, the public is still being provided with scant information, even though it was reported that several people, including an eight-week-old baby, died after more than 630 callers could not get through to the 000 number in South Australia, Western Australia, the Northern Territory and western New South Wales.

Western Australian police confirmed last Saturday a fourth person—a Perth man aged 49—had died during the outage. Other confirmed deaths were another Perth man, aged 74, and a 68-year-old woman from Adelaide. While the death of the eight-week-old baby in Gawler, near Adelaide, was initially linked to the meltdown, South Australian police later said preliminary investigations found the outage was “unlikely” to have contributed to the child's death.

Other fatalities or harmful outcomes may still emerge. Of the 631 customers known to have failed to connect, 86 reportedly eventually reached triple-zero through the Optus network, and 65 reached emergency services by switching to another carrier, such as Telstra or TPG. That left at least 480 customers who could not get through at all, some of whom have spoken to the media about the anxiety and trauma this caused.

It was not until last Tuesday morning—more than five days after the outage began—that police finally said they had followed up on all failed calls, conducting “welfare checks” on Optus's behalf.

This failure, the second such disaster in less than two years, has shocked the population by showing the dubious reliability of the triple-zero system, which is a life-and-death issue.

It has also highlighted the growing human toll of governments, Labor and Liberal-National Coalition alike over the past three decades, selling off the essential telecommunications services to corporate operators driven

by profit.

Both Optus, Australia's second-biggest telco, and Telstra, the largest, were privatised in the 1990s. That process began in 1991, when the trade union-backed Hawke-Keating Labor government sold Aussat, a government-owned satellite communications company, to Optus and gave the company a telecommunications carrier licence.

This created the conditions for Optus to start a cost-cutting competition with the government-owned Telecom. In 1993, Labor transformed Telecom into Telstra, a profit-making corporation. That laid the foundation for the Howard Liberal-National government to privatise Telstra in three stages, between 1997 and 2006.

This week, Optus, now wholly-owned by Singtel, a Singapore government-backed telco conglomerate, admitted that the triple-zero failure lasted far longer than it initially reported, and continued for 13 hours after several customers first reported the breakdown, which began at 12.30 a.m. on Thursday September 18, to Optus call centres.

Last Wednesday, Optus chief executive Stephen Rue claimed that unspecified preliminary internal investigations indicated that “human error” had caused the meltdown, not any lack of investment by the company or the outsourcing of its call centres overseas. “That's not an investment issue, that's people not following process,” he told the media, long before any official inquiry is even convened.

This is typical of the corporate elite, blaming workers, not systemic profit-driven cost-cutting, for catastrophes, and confident of government support.

To slash wages and conditions for its staff, Optus has about 3,600 overseas call centre workers across India and the Philippines, leaving about 250 centre operators within Australia.

The Labor government is equally trying to shield itself from blame. Speaking from New York, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese declared he would be surprised if Rue had not considered resigning.

Last Saturday, when Communications Minister Anika Wells faced a media conference for the first time during the

crisis, she said the government had been first informed of the outage the previous afternoon.

But Freedom of Information documents later revealed that the Communications Department was informed about the outage on Thursday September 18 at about 2.45 p.m.—24 hours before Wells claimed the government learned of the incident.

Speaking alongside Wells at a press conference last Monday, Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) chair Nerida O'Loughlin confirmed her organisation was aware of the outage on the Thursday, but described the alert as “perfunctory” and “inaccurate.”

So it is apparent that both the government and the official telco regulator relied on Optus’ initial false reports that the meltdown was minor and readily corrected.

Yet this was the second serious 000 breakdown for Optus since Labor took office in 2022, and the second time Optus has sought to downplay the seriousness of the failure.

Then-Optus chief Kelly Bayer Rosmarin told a Senate committee in 2023 that 228 triple-zero emergency calls were unable to connect during the company’s previous 16-hour outage in November 2023, which affected some 10 million customers and crippled phone and internet communications nationally.

“We have done welfare checks on all of those 228 calls. And thankfully everybody is OK,” Bayer Rosmarin told the committee, three days before resigning as the Optus CEO.

But in January 2024 Optus said an internal review had shown a further 2,468 customers made triple-zero calls during the outage that were unable to go through, and for which welfare checks were not undertaken.

ACMA later penalised Optus \$12 million for the breakdown. That amounted to a mere slap on the wrist for the multi-billion dollar company and its parent, Singtel, which boasts a market capitalisation of some \$82 billion.

Last Monday, it was revealed that the Labor government’s proposed “triple-zero custodian,” a supervisory agency that it promised after an official inquiry into the 2023 disaster, was yet to be staffed.

The Albanese government also has failed to introduce legislation to give the custodian any powers, which are meant to include compelling telcos to produce more information about outages. That could include new penalties for withholding such information.

Government sources could not give the media an intended timeline for the legislation to pass or for the custodian to be staffed. Only four parliamentary sitting weeks remain in 2025.

The “guardian” agency was one of 18 limited recommendations made by the inquiry into the 2023 meltdown, six of which remain to be implemented,

according to Wells. That is despite the urgency involved in ensuring the performance of the 000 system.

Moreover, in a submission published in April this year, Optus told the government there was no technical capability between the carriers, emergency services, ACMA and the federal government for sharing real-time information.

Optus declared that developing such a capability would require significant investment, making it “a huge burden.”

Despite this defiance, the Albanese government has continued to treat Optus with kid gloves, in line with Labor’s underlying pro-corporate program.

In September 2022, also under the Labor government, about 9.5 million current and former Optus customers were caught up in a serious data breach. Personal information, including names, dates of birth, phone numbers and email addresses, were exposed over three days. The personal details of about 10,200 people were later published online.

Optus is not alone. Telstra, now controlled by global financial investment funds, was fined \$3 million, a pittance, last December after a reported technical issue at a call centre meant that 127 calls to Triple 0 were not transferred to emergency services in March 2024. Another 346 calls were transferred to emergency services using a work-around that did not include the callers’ digital location.

In recent years, both companies have been penalised also, with relatively small fines of \$100 million (Optus) or \$50 million (Telstra) for “unconscionable conduct” after selling their services to hundreds of vulnerable customers who did not want or need them.

Optus and Telstra have each carried out waves of retrenchments and cheap labour outsourcing since being privatised. This continuing assault has been made possible only with the support of successive Labor and Coalition governments, combined with the assistance of the telco trade union bureaucracies, which have stifled or sold out repeated struggles by telecommunications workers against the decimation of their jobs.

These experiences demonstrate the irreconcilable incompatibility between the essential needs of the population—evenforemergency services—andthedomination of society’s basic infrastructure and productive capacity by the capitalist oligarchy, protected by their political servants.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**