

Australian Labor government presides over 000 breakdown

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Over the past several weeks, millions of people in Australia have been shocked to learn that they cannot rely on the essential infrastructure that is meant to contact ambulance, fire, rescue and other emergency services in the event of accidents and disasters.

In fact, frequent failures in the 000 emergency system have pointed to a deeper problem—an underlying lack of investment in the corporate-run mobile phone networks, potentially threatening hundreds of lives.

Time and again, people have been unable to get through to the triple-zero number because of outages in the ageing and under-resourced grids that have been operated by profit-gouging corporations since the privatisation of telecommunications in the 1990s.

Facing public alarm, the Albanese government is cynically trying to blame one company, Optus, the second largest telco operating in Australia, for the repeated failures since Labor took office in 2022, while promising cosmetic measures that will do nothing to stop the dangers to people.

This is the known recent record:

• A 16-hour outage in the Optus network in November 2023 affected almost 10 million customers and crippled phone and internet communications nationally. Two months after that catastrophe, Optus belatedly admitted that more than 2,500 customers had been unable to get through to triple-zero, and that no welfare checks were undertaken on the vast majority of them.

• The official telecommunications regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), penalised Optus \$12 million for the breakdown. That typified the Labor government's kid-glove treatment of the telco companies and the entire corporate elite. The fine was a slap on the wrist for the multi-billion dollar company and its parent, Singtel, which boasts a market capitalisation of some \$82 billion.

• The country's largest telco Telstra, 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.

• This September 18, a 13-hour Optus outage meant that four people, including an eight-week-old baby, are known to have died after more than 630 callers could not get through to the 000 number in South Australia, Western Australia (WA), the Northern Territory and western New South Wales (NSW).

• Ten days later, on September 28, almost 5,000 Optus customers in the Wollongong region of NSW were unable to contact emergency services for more than nine hours. At least nine triple-zero calls from the Dapto area failed.

• The next day, September 29, a Telstra mobile tower site had a 12-hour power outage in WA near Busselton in the state's southwest region. Telstra said it was not aware of any failed attempts to reach 000.

• On the same day, multiple 000 emergency calls to the ambulance service in northern NSW dropped out. Callers ringing 000 were connected to the operator, but when their calls were routed to NSW Ambulance, they repeatedly dropped out.

Later that week, the government-financed NBN Co, which runs a national broadband network, had an outage in WA due to a hardware fault that hit 700 households. That outage stopped calls being made over WiFi, but not mobile phone services.

More cases are still emerging. Three outraged customers told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7.30" television program last night that they had experienced repeated 000 failures weeks before the September 18 breakdown.

Today, in the Labor government's latest damage-control bid, Communications Minister Anika Wells asked the CEOs of Telstra, Optus and the third carrier, TPG Telecom (which operates Vodafone), to come to Canberra. It was a show of her insisting that they "restore confidence" in the 000 system by abiding by new regulations due to commence on November 1.

These rules only oblige the telco companies to notify ACMA, the government and emergency services of an outage “as soon as practicable,” and provide updates every six hours during the first 24 hours of the outage.

That vague requirement is essentially meaningless. Even if the regulations required immediate “real-time” notifications, that would not stop the breakdowns in the first place.

Similarly, the government pledged to table legislation in parliament to establish a “Triple Zero Custodian” to monitor the 000 system and possibly penalise companies for failures—powers that already exist through ACMA.

This agency will collect data but have no powers to require the urgently needed investment in the infrastructure.

This legislation had been promised after an inquiry into the 2023 breakdown, but was reportedly delayed by backroom consultations with the telecommunications companies themselves.

In the same vein, the government has now asked Optus to hire “external” investigators to examine the causes of the September 18 failure—for which Optus has already falsely blamed “human error” by workers—and review the company’s response to 000 calls.

This is blatant self-regulation. For its first inquiry, Optus has recruited Kerry Schott, a former investment banker who specialised in privatisations. For the second exercise, Optus has appointed Kearney, a large American global management consulting firm.

Public outrage has been fuelled by the release of Australian Taxation Office data showing that Optus’ owner Singtel, together with a quarter of large companies operating in Australia, paid no tax in 2023–24. Singtel had revenues of \$8.2 billion in Australia that year but managed to avoid taxes.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese last week rushed to defend minister Wells’ handling of the crisis, saying it was in Optus’ interests to be transparent about the findings of the Kearney audit.

This flies in the face of the reality that Optus, Telstra and TPG have been slashing costs, cutting investment and axing jobs for years in efforts to satisfy their giant corporate shareholders.

Over the past decade, Optus has axed its average number of direct employees by about 3,000 people to 6,200—a one-third cut. Optus has outsourced many of its operations to 3,500 “onshore and offshore partners.”

Telstra is no different. Last year it 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.

Under pressure from the global financial markets, Singtel,

the Singapore government-backed owner of Optus, has been trying to offload Optus, as well as operations in India, Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia. It is trying to raise billions of dollars to invest in data centres, boost dividends and undertake share buybacks.

Yuen Kuan Moon, the Group CEO of Singtel, told investors in August that he was in the final year of a three-year plan to slash \$S600 million (\$A709 million) in combined costs from its Singaporean business and Optus.

Paul Chew, head of research at investment group PhillipCapital, said in a research note that Singtel had identified cost savings in Optus’ IT and network system as it sought to lift Optus’ profit margins of around 27 percent closer to rivals Telstra and TPG Telecom, which have margins well above 30 percent.

Stephen Rue, who was installed as Optus CEO last year, after six years heading NBN Co, brought in international management consultants Bain & Co in late April on a contract to make Optus more efficient.

Both Optus and Telstra were privatised from 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.

As intended, Optus started a cost-cutting competition with the government-owned Telecom. In 1993, Labor transformed Telecom into Telstra, a profit-making corporation, paving the way for the Howard Liberal-National government to privatisate it in three stages, between 1997 and 2006.

This continuing assault has been made possible by the telco trade union bureaucracies, which have stifled or sold-out repeated struggles by telecommunications workers against the destruction of their jobs and conditions.

This record demonstrates the human price being paid for the ever-greater subordination of the critical needs of the population—even for life-saving emergency services—to the interests of the capitalist oligarchy, protected by their political servants.

To reverse this catastrophe requires the socialist alternative, overturning capitalism. That includes placing essential utilities, such as communications, and the major banks and corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.



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