

Australia: Sydney rail defects and delays at highest level in a decade

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A recent government-commissioned review into Sydney's public rail network has revealed that safety and service incidents across the system have reached their highest levels in a decade. The review itself is ultimately aimed at whitewashing the impact of longstanding neglect under successive Liberal-National and Labor governments.

The Independent Rail Review, published at the end of August, was ordered to investigate a major two-day disruption across the Sydney Trains network in May. An overhead wire broke just beyond Homebush station—a key transfer junction—affecting eight of the city's nine lines.

The review is the second in just over two years into Sydney's rail network. A 2023 review found train delays had climbed to their worst levels in 10 years, with over half of all disruptions stemming from deteriorating infrastructure such as tracks, signalling, structures and electrical systems.

This period also saw a sharp rise in the backlog of routine inspections and unresolved maintenance issues. As defects accumulated, Sydney Trains was forced to introduce Temporary Speed Restrictions (TSRs) across the network, further undermining the reliability of train services.

The 2023 review made 69 recommendations to reduce the backlog, including an immediate infrastructure “maintenance blitz,” unfurled as the “Rail Repair Plan” (RRP) in June 2023. However, this was funded by merely reallocating funds from an already inadequate maintenance budget.

The latest review found that incidents, defects and delays have become even more numerous since the 2023 report.

The number of TSRs reached 65 in February 2024, the highest ever recorded, while the backlog of required inspections ballooned from 79 in August to 388 by December. The number of high-priority defects, defined

as “Asset with damage or flaw requiring maintenance to be fixed,” reached an all-time record of 4,714 in June 2025, compared with just over 3,800 when the RRP started two years earlier.

In May last year, there were 568 peak-hour incidents linked to infrastructure faults, the highest since 2014. This metric has remained elevated throughout this year, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH). Some 558 delay-causing incidents were logged in March, and 538 in July.

These “incidents,” defined as any event causing a delay of more than five minutes, have become a near-constant feature of the network.

The August review showed that train delays at peak hour were occurring at the highest rate since 2016. Since November 2024, the “punctuality” of intercity trains has remained between 60 and 75 percent, well below the target of 92 percent. With more than 1.1 million passenger journeys on a typical weekday, this means for the past nine months, 275,000 to 440,000 people have experienced some kind of delay each day.

According to the SMH, Sydney Trains has reported 31 “major incidents” since the beginning of 2023. Of these, 42 percent were attributed to infrastructure failures, 23 percent to operational issues, and 10 percent to weather-related damage to infrastructure.

The newspaper noted that infrastructure-related defects on Sydney's rail network had reached their highest levels since 2018, with 39,634 recorded in June, 38,932 in July and 38,912 in August 2025.

According to the August review, the Homebush incident was caused by a preventable wiring breakage, which cut power to a train pulling into the station. An issue with the wire had been detected five years earlier, but “was not followed up.” The review also stated that visual inspections of the wire were performed every 13 weeks, but that officers “cannot get close enough for an adequate

view” and had to rely on binoculars.

There are “planned” physical measurements every four years, but the wire being “thin and beyond breaking” was not detected during these inspections. “In our view their tools are insufficient for the job they are given,” stated the review.

The May event was only the most significant of a string of major incidents.

One day in March, urgent repairs were required for the signalling at Ashfield station, another busy junction, causing delays and disruption to all train lines except one from morning until the “end of service” at night.

In January, a derailment occurred at Clarendon station in the northwestern outskirts of Sydney, after a train failed to stop at a red signal. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) noted at the time that “wet weather” was thought to be the cause.

The frequency of such safety breaches, referred to as signal passed at danger (SPAD), has increased 25 percent in the last year, with more than four incidents a week on average, according to the ABC. The derailment on the Richmond line was the product of just one SPAD out of 224 in the 2024–2025 financial year, 46 more than in 2023–2024.

The Office of the National Rail Safety Regulator explains that causes and contributing factors for SPADs include driver fatigue, workload, inadequate controls, inadequate maintenance, poor signal placement, poor visibility and trees blocking signals.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of infrastructure failures caused by systemic underfunding over an extended period, both the 2023 and 2025 reviews attempted to pin responsibility for the dire state of the rail network on “severe weather” and workers taking industrial action in 2021–2022 and 2024.

The latter is in line with the relentless campaign, which reached fever pitch late last year, by Sydney Trains, state and federal Labor governments and the corporate media, which have repeatedly vilified rail workers for taking even the most limited industrial action against cuts to real wages and conditions.

Every minor delay or crowded train was seized as an occasion to slander and attack workers in the press, while multiple Fair Work Commission (FWC) and Federal Court cases were aimed at denying their right to take industrial action.

In the face of this outright hostility, the union bureaucracies of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and other “combined rail

unions” insisted that the only way forward for workers was plaintive appeals to the very Labor government attacking them.

The union leadership repeatedly cancelled planned strikes and placed conditions on industrial action which had nothing to do with workers’ demands, such as calling them off if train travel was made free for a weekend. This gave complete control over the dispute to the government, which was effectively able to decide which stoppages could proceed, without ever having to make a single concession to workers. As they have done in every NSW rail dispute for decades, the unions ultimately rammed through the government’s demands despite strong opposition from workers.

The management, government and media lies stand exposed by the fact that, while there has been no industrial action since the FWC ordered a ban in February, and a sell-out enterprise agreement was pushed through by the unions in June, the condition of the rail network has only worsened.

This is because the defects, incidents and delays are the product of years of underfunding and inadequate maintenance. Sydney’s rail network, the only remaining mass transit system in NSW still under public ownership, has and continues to be starved of investment. This is part of a privatisation-by-stealth operation, devaluing the existing system and moving parts of it, along with all new rail development in the city, into the privately owned, driverless, Metro system.

Under capitalism, public services that are essential to daily life are subordinated to the priorities of profit, not safety or social welfare. 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 needs of the working class, including for high-quality public transport, with good wages and conditions for all staff, rather than the profit demands of the wealthy few.



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