

Australia: Sydney light rail fire exposes public transport safety crisis

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On Thursday, March 5, light rail services in Sydney's CBD were suspended after a fire broke out on the roof of a tram during morning peak hour. The incident is only the most public in a series of technical failures that have plagued the light rail network in Australia's largest city, highlighting the deterioration of safety and infrastructure under successive Labor and Liberal-National governments.

The tram halted at the Chalmers Street stop, outside Central, Sydney's busiest train station, after staff became aware of the blaze. Emergency services attended around 8:20 a.m. and light rail operations did not resume until the afternoon.

Photos and eyewitness accounts on social media reveal that the vehicle was already on fire before it left the previous stop, Surry Hills. Reddit user uhmatomy wrote: "I was there. Big BANG and some pops and flames far bigger than [those in the above photo] as it left the platform.

"It literally caught on fire seconds before leaving the Surry Hills stop and went down the hill."

X/Twitter user Michael Cooper posted photos showing fire and smoke emanating from the tram roof at Surry Hills and wrote that: "We were all banging on the driver's cubicle trying to tell him but he ignored us and continued on to Central."

Cooper's comment, and the fact that the tram continued on to Central, strongly suggest that the driver was not alerted to the malfunction by any warning lights or alarms built in to the vehicle, although the fire and smoke were already substantial enough to be spotted by passers-by.

Services were initially suspended between three stops only, before the entire central Sydney and eastern suburbs' L2 and L3 lines were stopped as a precaution "given recent similar events," private operator

Transdev told Sky News.

These unspecified "recent similar events" were further alluded to by Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) Divisional President Peter Grech, who blithely declared it was the third tram fire in a week.

Calling for an "urgent investigation," Grech declared: "Without immediate action, there's a real risk to commuters and light rail workers. What happened today raises real concerns about whether the fleet is being properly maintained."

The RTBU's response poses obvious questions: Why did the two previous incidents (about which no further detail is forthcoming) not "raise real concerns"? Had this highly public incident in the heart of Sydney not happened, would the RTBU leadership have said anything at all about light rail fires? How many more fires and other safety incidents has the union covered up?

Even based on what has been publicly reported, Sydney's light rail system has a grim safety and reliability record:

- In April 2020, there was an explosion at the Randwick depot after a tram's batteries overcharged and blew off the compartment cover. The Office of Transport Safety Investigations (OTSI), the NSW transport investigator, concluded in December 2020 that among the contributing factors were software data corruption and that "neither Alstom's validation processes nor fault monitoring processes were sufficient" to detect it. The Australian Transport Safety Bureau, a national investigative government body, stated in the final investigation report that it was "satisfied that the safety actions taken by Alstom will reduce the risk of this safety issue."

- In September 2021, cracks were identified in the wheel arches of the entire 12-tram fleet operating the

Inner West Light Rail Line or L1. The OTSI investigation published in 2025 determined contributing factors to be inadequate maintenance and insufficient proactive inspections of the underframes, “despite there being knowledge of similar fractures identified in overseas vehicles and considering the risk of LRV derailment due to a fractured underframe.”

- In December 2024, the opening of the Parramatta line, known as L4, was delayed due to problems in overhead wiring which incidentally revealed that half the network’s fastening joints were defective and required replacement, according to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

- A video posted on Reddit in July last year shows a light rail tram at Randwick stop with smoke coming from its roof and fire services attending.

Grech’s talk of “immediate action” is nothing more than empty bluster. In the face of “real risk” to passengers and workers, the RTBU is ensuring workers stay on the job, maintaining business as usual for Transdev and the state Labor government.

Rather than a fight by workers to demand safe conditions, the union is promoting illusions in an investigation, to be conducted by Transport for NSW—i.e., management—and the Office of the National Rail Safety Regulator (ONRSR). Such investigations are invariably protracted whitewashes, covering up the responsibility of private operators, governments and the unions in presiding over unsafe conditions.

At the end of last year, a government-commissioned inquiry into Sydney’s public rail network revealed that incidents, defects and delays were at their highest levels in a decade, largely due to deteriorating infrastructure and unresolved maintenance backlogs.

In May 2025, a preventable wiring breakage cut power to a train pulling into Homebush station—a key transfer junction—causing major disruptions across the Sydney train network for two days. The Independent Rail Review found that transport workers’ tools to detect faulty wiring were “insufficient.”

On the same day as the light rail fire, Minister of Transport John Graham announced the deployment of new wire-checking technology. In other words, seven months after the inquiry into a crisis caused by government neglect in the first place, new technology is issued, while staffing, salaries, maintenance, other equipment and the public transport budget as a whole

continue to be attacked, and vital public services are increasingly privatised.

The Sydney light rail network operates under “public-private partnerships” between the NSW government and private consortia. Lines L1, L2 and L3 are operated and maintained by the ALTRAC Light Rail consortium, which includes Transdev and Alstom. The L4 is run by a separate consortium.

In Sydney, the light rail, Metro, bus and ferry services have been handed over for profitable exploitation, leaving only the heavy rail passenger transport system in public hands. The decades-long program of privatisation, begun in NSW under the Carr Labor government, has been carried out around Australia by both Labor and Liberal-National administrations and enforced by the RTBU and other unions.

Light rail workers and passengers cannot rely on appeals to the state Labor government, the so-called safety regulators or the RTBU to deliver a safe and reliable public transport system. These are the very organisations that have overseen the years of underfunding, inadequate maintenance and privatisation responsible for the dire conditions that exist today.

New independent fighting organisations and leadership must be built: Rank-and-file committees run by and for workers. Through these committees, light rail and other transport workers, together with broader layers, can take up a fight for staff and passenger safety, as well as decent wages and conditions. This struggle is inseparable from the fight against privatisation of vital infrastructure, including transport, hospitals and schools, and against capitalism itself, under which public services that are essential to daily life are subordinated to the priorities of profit, not safety or social welfare.



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