

New Zealand train crash exposes inadequate safety systems

Our correspondent
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Four passengers and two workers were injured when a passenger train in Wellington crashed into a concrete stop block south of Khandallah station on Saturday June 6. The incident raises serious questions about safety on the rail network in New Zealand’s capital city.

According to media reports, the crash occurred around 7.20pm when a two-car suburban commuter service travelling from Johnsonville to Wellington entered a runoff siding—a dead-end safety track whose purpose is to intentionally divert out-of-control trains—just south of Khandallah station. The train, travelling at 30 kilometres per hour, collided with a concrete buffer at the end of the siding.

Nine people were on board: seven passengers, a locomotive engineer and a train manager. Six were taken to hospital, including three children.

Tonia Haskell, managing director of Transdev Wellington, which operates the trains, later confirmed both workers sustained head and concussion injuries. One worker is still in hospital as of this writing.

Local resident Chris Myatt, one of the first people to reach the crash scene, told Radio NZ that passenger seats had buckled and been pushed upwards by the force of the impact. “When I entered the driver’s cabin there was a lot of blood,” he said.

Bede Crestani, who lives below the station, told RNZ that the buffer prevented the train from continuing beyond the railway boundary and towards nearby houses.

The Transport Accident Investigation Commission (TAIC) has opened a formal inquiry. Chief investigator Louise Cook told the media it would investigate the train, staff, infrastructure, signalling systems and operational procedures.

TAIC investigations often take a year or longer to complete. The agency has said it will release interim findings on the cause of the crash as soon as possible to ensure that they are acted on.

It is not clear why the train entered the siding. Transdev has said publicly that it may have passed a red light—termed a signal passed at danger (SPAD)—but this has not been

confirmed. It is not known whether the accident involved a signalling fault, a braking problem, other equipment malfunction, a problem with the track, human error or a combination of factors.

The protracted nature of the official investigation itself raises serious concerns. Thousands of passengers use the Wellington region’s rail network every day. The Johnsonville line remains suspended and replaced by buses while repairs and investigations continue. No date has been announced for the full restoration of rail services. Management has not explained what measures are being taken now to ensure a similar incident cannot happen again.

Despite these unanswered questions, government officials declared that all safety mechanisms had worked as intended.

Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) chairman Daran Ponter, a Labour Party member, told the *New Zealand Herald* that the “safety system” was “designed to stop the train moving beyond the railway line. That’s exactly what happened in this case.” Without the concrete block, installed in April 2025, “the train could have found itself in somebody’s backyard.”

Deputy Prime Minister and acting transport minister Winston Peters similarly wrote on X that “the network is designed with multiple layers of safety.” If a train passed a red signal at Khandallah, it would be diverted to the runoff line “to prevent any risk of collision with another train.”

While the incident was “concerning,” Peters said, the diversion had prevented “any risk of collision with another train” and the “carriages also appear to have responded as designed—while the images are alarming, two critical safety systems appear to have functioned as intended.”

The minister did not mention the fact that six people—two thirds of those onboard—were hospitalised.

The assertion that the system functioned as intended does not answer whether the system itself is adequate. The safety mechanism in question involved diverting the train onto a siding where it struck a concrete barrier with enough force to cause serious injuries.

The Saturday evening service had only a handful of

passengers. Had a similar incident occurred during a weekday peak-hour service carrying hundreds of people, including schoolchildren, the consequences could have been catastrophic.

The Khandallah crash was not an isolated event. Wellington's rail network has experienced repeated signalling failures, infrastructure faults, service disruptions and ongoing operational problems associated with ageing infrastructure and decades of underinvestment.

According to *Stuff*, if investigators ultimately determine that the Khandallah accident involved a train passing a red signal, it would be the fourth SPAD involving Wellington passenger services in the past 12 months.

One of the most important issues highlighted by the crash is the absence of automatic train protection technology, which is standard in many countries.

On June 11 KiwiRail chief metro officer David Gordon told Radio NZ that Wellington's signalling system is "much less forgiving" than modern systems used in Auckland, Australia and Europe. Unlike those places, Wellington does not operate the European Train Control System (ETCS), which can automatically reduce speed or apply the brakes when trains exceed authorised movement limits or pass signals incorrectly.

Gordon estimated that implementing the ETCS in Wellington would cost between \$500 million and \$750 million. Ponter told RNZ that an ETCS had been discussed for years but governments had not provided the necessary funding.

The TAIC recently recommended the use of such technology after a near-collision involving a freight train near the town of Morrinsville in 2024. That incident involved a train passing a signal at danger.

In February 2018, TAIC warned of a "heightened risk" of collisions near Wellington Railway Station, following a number of near misses. KiwiRail at the time raised the possibility of installing an ETCS on the network, but said it was not a priority.

Signal failures are also a recurrent issue. On May 25, 2026, a nationwide signal outage just after 9:00am stopped trains for almost half an hour.

Responsibility for Wellington's rail network is divided. The state-owned company KiwiRail is responsible for maintaining the rail infrastructure, while the GWRC contracts private operator Transdev, a French-based multinational company, to run the services.

There have been decades of privatisation, cost-cutting and pro-business restructuring by successive governments and councils. Infrastructure has aged, major upgrades have been delayed and investment decisions repeatedly postponed while workers and passengers face deteriorating conditions.

Train workers face chronic staffing shortages, heavy workloads and roster pressures that contribute to fatigue.

Neither the current National Party-led coalition government nor previous Labour governments have committed the resources required to modernise the network. Last month's austerity budget provided just \$106.9 million for unspecified upgrades to Auckland and Wellington rail networks—much less than would be needed for an ETCS in the capital.

The Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) has suppressed opposition to worsening conditions for decades. The union has not called a meeting of Transdev Wellington workers to discuss the Khandallah incident. Instead, it joined the company and politicians in promoting complacency. According to RNZ, RMTU Secretary Todd Valster "said train crashes were incredibly rare and this was the first significant incident involving these types of train."

Meanwhile, Transdev is telling workers not to speak to the media or to post comments on social media about the crash. The WSWS calls on workers to defy this gag order. Workers and passengers have every right to openly discuss their concerns about the safety of the network, and should demand the immediate disclosure of all safety-related information.

We call on workers to contact the WSWS to discuss the incident on June 6 and the way forward in the fight for safe working conditions—in opposition to both the company and the union bureaucracy. We will protect your anonymity from the companies, unions and government authorities.

Workers should demand billions of dollars in investment in modern rail infrastructure, with safety systems to prevent such crashes. The claims by governments and councils that there is "no money" for this must be rejected: the government is diverting billions of dollars into tax cuts for the rich, and to the military to prepare for war, while gutting public services across the country.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact