

New Zealand: Company, union gag workers from speaking publicly on train crash

Our correspondent
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Passenger train services on the Johnsonville line in Wellington resumed on June 17 after being suspended following a crash on June 6. Six people were injured including both crew members, the driver and the train manager, who suffered serious head and concussion injuries. The train manager is understood to be still in hospital.

Transdev, the multinational company which runs train services in the Wellington region, confirmed to workers that the incident happened at 7:05pm. The train was directed into a runaway siding—a dead-end safety track designed to stop out-of-control trains—south of Khandallah station.

It remains unclear how the train came to enter the siding. Transdev said it may have passed a red signal—an incident known as a signal passed at danger (SPAD)—but this has not been confirmed.

The Transport Accident Investigation Commission (TAIC) is carrying out a formal inquiry, which could take one or two years, although it says information about the cause of the crash will be made available as soon as possible. Regular services have restarted for thousands of people who use the line every day.

Immediately after the crash, politicians rushed to assure the public that safety mechanisms had worked well. Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) chair Daran Ponter, a Labour Party member, told the *New Zealand Herald* that the stop block was “designed to stop the train moving beyond the railway line. That’s exactly what happened in this case.”

Acting Transport Minister Winston Peters wrote on X that “critical safety systems appear to have functioned as intended.”

GWRC deputy chairwoman Ros Connelly told the *Herald* on June 8: “The message for Wellington commuters is that the train and the whole network

responded as we would have hoped.” She said the rail network was “really safe” and the crash was “a one-off.”

Connelly acknowledged that it was a “traumatic event” for those injured and said it was “really lucky that it happened reasonably late on a Saturday evening” rather than during peak times when hundreds of people would have been on board.

In a statement published on June 11, Chris Calvi-Freeman, a former GWRC manager of public transport, contradicted these official assurances. He noted that there were two similar collisions with a concrete stop block at Melling Station in 2013 and 2014, in which passengers were injured.

“Following these accidents, the stop block at Melling was replaced with an energy-absorbing buffer stop. A similar block has been installed at Johnsonville station”—but not at the siding near Khandallah.

Calvi-Freeman stated: “Trains are very heavy. Even at slow speeds they have enormous momentum. Collisions with a solid concrete stop block are always likely to cause significant damage and injuries. Clearly some form of energy absorption is called for.”

The *NZ Herald* reported on June 10 that in 2021 a “business case recommended upgrading the region’s network to a European Train Control System [ETCS], an advanced signalling and control system that has the ability to override the driver to automatically enforce train speeds and follow signals.” The system is in use in Auckland, Australia and many other countries.

Transdev and KiwiRail representatives have said that an ETCS would have prevented the June 6 crash or significantly reduced its severity. Successive Labour Party and National Party-led governments have refused to allocate the necessary funding for such a system, which could cost more than \$700 million.

Transdev has told workers not to speak to the media or make statements on social media about the crash. Management gave workers a list of “customer talking points” about the incident. If a customer asks, “Is it safe to travel now?” workers are instructed to reply: “Yes. Safety systems worked as they are designed to, and the network has been confirmed as safe to operate.” Transdev says it has run test trains on the Johnsonville line and put in place temporary speed restrictions while the investigation continues.

In the Khandallah incident, however, it was the “safety system” itself—a concrete block at the end of a siding—which caused a crash that led to six people being taken to hospital. Until all such blocks are replaced with much safer systems, such as shock absorbing buffers or an ETCS, it is far from clear that a similar incident could not happen again.

The Rail and Maritime Union (RMTU) has raised no objection to the company’s handling of the incident. When the WSWS asked RMTU general secretary Todd Valster whether he was aware that Transdev had instructed workers not to speak publicly about the crash, he replied: “Yeah, because it’s under investigation.” He described this as “the proper process to allow investigators to do their job rather than speculate on what occurred.”

Valster also said the RMTU would not call a meeting of members to discuss the crash, because “it can’t be discussed at this stage until it’s ascertained what actually occurred.”

Valster, himself a former locomotive engineer, criticised the GWRC for “saying the network is absolutely safe and [the Khandallah incident] is a one-off, because you can never guarantee that with trains and people, and it actually isn’t a one-off.” He also noted that the network was “fairly old” and that an ETCS would have lessened the impact of the crash.

The union-backed gag order, however, means that Transdev, KiwiRail, the GWRC and the government can all declare publicly that the network is safe and passengers have nothing to worry about, while the workers who operate the trains are not allowed to publicly question or discuss these assurances.

The Khandallah crash is one of several serious incidents in recent years, which are the result of underfunded and outdated systems on the rail network. The Melling crashes in 2013 and 2014 followed a train

derailment on February 1, 2011 at Ngaio Station on the Johnsonville line, in which a train crashed through a boundary fence and into the station’s carpark. Fortunately, no one was injured.

On August 17, 2021, a four-car passenger service derailed south of Paekakariki. Again, injuries were avoided. On October 15, 2025, a truck that broke down on a level crossing at Waikanae was struck by a freight train; the incident is still under investigation.

Numerous near-misses have occurred at Wellington Railway Station, including signalling failures. In one case in November 2019, according to the *Post*, “two trains came within 31.8m of a head-on collision after a driver missed a red light with no other mitigation measures in place to stop it.” A modern signalling system was finally introduced at the station in 2024, replacing a switch system that had not been significantly changed since the 1930s.

In July 2023, the *Post* reported: “Wellington trains have run nine red lights in the past year.” In the past 12 months there have been three such incidents, not including the Khandallah crash.

Train workers and passengers cannot afford to blindly trust the assurances from company managers, bureaucrats and politicians. Workers should defy the orders to remain silent about the Khandallah incident and demand the immediate disclosure of all safety-related information.

The WSWS calls on workers to establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracy and capitalist political parties. Such committees must organise an industrial campaign for immediate upgrades to prevent any repeat of the Khandallah crash and address all other safety concerns. We urge rail workers to contact us to discuss these urgent issues.



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