Australia: Telstra outage stops trains, blocks emergency calls

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10 July 2026

A major network outage this week at Telstra disrupted mobile phone and internet services nationally, brought regional rail operations to a standstill in two states and prevented hundreds of people from reaching the Triple Zero emergency line.

The failure at Australia's largest telecommunications company underscores the dangers created by decades of privatisation, subordinating vital public infrastructure to the profit interests of big business.

The connectivity issues began before dawn on Wednesday, with customers across the country finding their phones stuck in "SOS only" mode, unable to make calls, send messages or access mobile data.

The outage affected not only Telstra's direct customers but also a swathe of smaller mobile virtual network operators that rent capacity on Telstra's network, including Boost Mobile, Belong, ALDI Mobile, Tangerine and Woolworths Mobile.

Mobile phone and internet connectivity is an essential public utility, relied upon in almost every facet of daily life. This was starkly exposed on Wednesday in the broad range of services impacted: Cafes and other small businesses were unable to take electronic payments, taxis were left without both their booking and payment systems, rideshare and delivery drivers were unable to work, Australia Post workers could not use their parcel scanners, traffic lights failed in South Australia, to name just a few.

Telstra said the outage was caused by a software bug introduced through a firmware update. "There was a software fault that… changed the time and caused the time desynchronisation," the company's chief financial officer, Michael Ackland, said on Wednesday afternoon.

The error reportedly set the date on some of Telstra's hardware back by almost two decades, causing problems with security authentications and preventing customers' phones from connecting to the network.

The glitch was caused by a well-known limitation of the way older GPS systems store dates, with a counter that resets to zero after 1,024 weeks—19.6 years. This was at the centre of a 2020 outage at Jersey Telecom that took down phone services in the Channel Islands.

Regional rail networks in Victoria and New South Wales were thrown into chaos as the outage hit the National Train Communications System, which relies on Telstra's 4G network for real-time monitoring and voice communication with control centres.

The crisis was particularly acute in Victoria because other aspects of the public transport network, including passenger information screens, ticketing and security also rely on Telstra, according to RMIT University public transport systems specialist Koorosh Gharehbaghi.

He told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, "When Telstra's network went down, many of the interconnected systems failed partially and some entirely."

Gharehbaghi said the incident was "a warning about the lack of redundant infrastructure that could provide resilience across Australia's entire transport system."

William Tieppo, CEO of V/Line, Victoria's government-owned regional train system, said the trains did have a backup satellite system, but it did not work correctly because of the nature of the Telstra failure, as the 4G network repeatedly went on- and off-line.

"The 4G network was connected to the train radio system and the satellite phone would be talking to the 4G network and saying, 'The 4G network is connected and you don't need me anymore'," he said. As a result, "the satellite system was turning on and off."

Around 100 regional trains in the state were operating when the network failed, bringing them to a stop where they were, before slowly advancing to the next station.

All services were suspended on V/Line, which carries an average of more than 70,000 passengers every day, many of them workers who commute to the state capital, Melbourne, each day. The disruption continued into Thursday, with no trains at all in the morning peak and rail services only starting to be resumed in the late morning.

While replacement buses were organised, their capacity was woefully inadequate for the number of passengers trying

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to return from the city on Wednesday afternoon. The stranded commuters' frustration was exacerbated when V/Line officials absurdly instructed them to "make your own way home."

"What are we meant to do? Start walking up the Hume Highway?" one passenger asked the *Herald Sun.*

Rail services in parts of the New South Wales Southern Highlands and Hunter Valley were also suspended, along with interstate trains.

The outage also played havoc with the critical Triple Zero emergency system, with hundreds of people seeking assistance from police, ambulance or firefighting services unable to get through.

Telstra initially announced that the issue was "mostly resolved" at 4 p.m. Wednesday, but then at 9 p.m. said they had "identified a secondary issue impacting some calls including Triple Zero." Only at 1:30 p.m. Thursday did the company state that this "subsequent issue" had been fixed, and that "Customers can feel confident calling Triple Zero."

Ackland said yesterday that the company had identified 639 callers who had unsuccessfully tried to reach Triple Zero during the outage. Of those, 230 callers were contacted via text message and said they did not need further assistance and 402 were contacted via voice call. One hundred and seventy were referred to police for further welfare checks and at least seven needed assistance from an emergency service.

South Australian police said yesterday they were investigating whether a death on Wednesday was connected to the outage. South Australian Police Commissioner Grant Stevens told radio station FIVEAA this morning, "That person's spouse did try and call… triple zero for an ambulance. That call didn't go through, so they utilised another phone."

However Ackland said there was no record of a failed call from a Telstra phone and that, "there were no active outages affecting the local area at the time."

When a customer's mobile network is unavailable, the system is supposed to allow emergency calls to be made through a competing network—Optus or Vodafone—that does have reception. But yet again, as has been the case with previous failures in recent years, this failsafe did not work correctly.

An Optus fault on September 18 last year, caused by a botched upgrade, resulted in 605 emergency calls failing to go through, leading to at least two deaths. Just under a year earlier, a 13-hour national outage at the carrier resulted in almost 2,500 Triple Zero calls not getting through.

The outages at both companies follow sweeping job cuts. Optus slashed some 800 roles in 2023–2024, while Telstra has thrown more than 4,200 workers on the scrapheap since mid-2024, with a further 650 cuts announced in February.

Shane Murphy, national secretary of the Communication Workers Union (CWU), said, "It is disgraceful to see one of the nation's largest carriers make shocking cuts to its workforce—the individuals who keep us connected—and witness the detrimental impact on the quality of services."

The reality is that the CWU and other unions have over decades collaborated with management in one job-slashing restructuring after another at both the major telecommunications companies, including their privatisation in the 1990s.

This was part of a sweeping privatisation agenda in Australia and internationally. Under Hawke and Keating, Labor also sold off the Commonwealth Bank, Qantas and other major public utilities, while transforming Telecom into Telstra, a profit-making corporation. That laid the basis for the following Howard Liberal-National government to complete the Telstra privatisation over three stages, between 1997 and 2006.

The shutdown of large parts of the country's communications system, even for a matter of hours, reveals how vulnerable society has become under capitalism's domination of every sphere of life. A single software failure in a profit-driven network was enough to jeopardise emergency medical care, immobilise rail operations across multiple states and disrupt the daily lives of millions.

This poses the urgent need to fight for a socialist alternative, which includes placing public utilities, such as communications, and the major banks and corporations under public ownership and democratic workers' control.

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