Australia: Multiple fires on Sydney trams in 1 day highlight deepening safety crisis

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On July 11, two light rail vehicles caught fire in separate incidents on Sydney's CBD and South East network, forcing the evacuation of passengers and the suspension of services. This puts the tally of Sydney tram fires at six since February.

The CBD and South East light rail lines are operated by the ALTRAC Light Rail consortium, comprising Transdev and Alstom, in a "public-private partnership" with the NSW government. Under this arrangement, the state owns the infrastructure while a private consortium operates and maintains the network for profit.

The first July 11 fire occurred at 7:53 a.m. as a tram approached the King Street stop in the city centre. Smoke was observed rising from the roof of the trailing carriage and passengers were evacuated.

The second broke out at 10:22 a.m. near Moore Park, again forcing an evacuation after smoke was seen coming from the roof. This tram, vehicle X21, had already caught fire once before—at the Randwick depot on February 27, where it was "isolated within the depot for investigation" before being returned to service.

Following the second July 11 fire, the entire fleet was temporarily withdrawn. A reduced fleet returned to service the next day after Transdev conducted an internal safety assessment.

A spokesperson for the company said it had "identified that the incidents involved batteries from a specific batch, which have now been withdrawn from service." Vehicles still operating, they assured the public, "do not use the affected batch of batteries."

However, the batteries that caught fire last month were installed as part of a replacement program that was "brought forward" after the three fires in February and March suggesting that the problem may run deeper than a single dodgy production run.

Transdev Australasia chief executive Brian Brennan told the *Sydney Morning Herald*, "We didn't anticipate that we would have the level of difficulty with the new batteries."

Asked who supplied the batteries, Brennan claimed not to know, describing them only as "industrial batteries also used in the aviation industry." Nevertheless, he confidently assured the *Herald* the trams in service are "perfectly safe."

In an attempt to downplay the seriousness of the repeated fires, Brennan claimed the lead-acid batteries self-extinguish within three to five minutes and that the fire would not spread to other parts of the tram.

The Office of Transport Safety Investigations (OTSI), the state transport investigator, published an "Interim Factual Statement" on July 14. It documents the six fires since February, all originating in the same roof-mounted battery system:

• The first two fires occurred on February 27—one at the Randwick depot and another at the Royal Randwick stop while the tram was in service.

• The third incident was on March 5, when a tram caught fire at the Surry Hills stop with flames visible on the roof. Passengers reported banging on the driver's cubicle to alert him, suggesting no automatic warning system had detected the blaze. The vehicle was driven to the next stop. The entire fleet was withdrawn from service and returned later the same day.

• A fourth fire occurred on June 29. Bystanders reported seeing smoke coming from the tram's roof as it left the Town Hall stop, and flames were visible once it reached the Queen Victoria Building (QVB) stop, where passengers were evacuated and firefighters extinguished the blaze.

While it is not mentioned in the report, this year is not the first time Sydney's light rail vehicles have encountered serious battery-related issues. In April

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2020, a tram battery overcharged at Randwick depot, causing an explosion that blew off the battery compartment cover. At the time, OTSI concluded that contributing factors included control software corruption and that "neither Alstom's validation processes nor fault monitoring processes were sufficient" to detect the overcharging, which had also affected other trams.

The July 14 statement does not differ from OTSI's previous report in March, except to include the details of three most recent fires. It provides no insight into how the investigation is proceeding or probable causes of the incidents, and does not indicate when the final report will be issued.

Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) divisional president Peter Grech complained that Transdev "had not been transparent" about the source of the fires, telling the *Herald* he suspected the problem was not the batteries, but the trams.

Grech rhetorically asked Transdev, "What's going on? What are you doing to fix it?" A similar question could well be asked of Grech and the RTBU: Why has the RTBU taken no action to halt the safety crisis developing in the public transportation system?

Grech declared after the March 5 fire that "without immediate action, there's a real risk to commuters and light rail workers." But four months on, the reality is that the RTBU has ensured that workers continue to operate trams that have caught fire six times this year.

Instead, the union is promoting illusions in investigations conducted by Transport for NSW—that is, by management—and OTSI. Such investigations are invariably protracted whitewashes, covering up the responsibility of private operators, governments and the unions in presiding over unsafe conditions.

What the safety regulators and union bureaucracies are covering up is the fundamental cause of deteriorating public transport infrastructure and safety: capitalism, under which social need is entirely subordinated to private profit.

The privatisation of Sydney's public transport was initiated under the NSW Labor government of Bob Carr (1995–2005) and has been extended by every administration since. Buses, light rail, ferries and the metro have been handed to private consortia. Only the heavy rail passenger network remains in public hands.

While the RTBU bureaucracy occasionally postures as an opponent of privatisation, they have been complicit at every stage. The union leadership has ensured workers have never been mobilised against the selloff and has enforced the demands of private operators and the government in successive enterprise agreements throughout the public transport sector.

Light rail and other public transport workers need to build new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, led by and accountable to workers, to oversee safety inspections, demand full disclosure of maintenance records, and implement a ban on the operation of vehicles unless they are proven safe, to workers' satisfaction.

Through rank-and-file committees, politically independent from the union bureaucracies and Labor, Sydney light rail workers can link up with broader sections of workers, across Australia and internationally. The fight for workers and passengers' safety is inseparable from the fight to reverse privatisation and to bring public transport under democratic workers' control, to serve the needs of society, not expand the wealth of the corporate elite.

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