

Australian air traffic control crisis deepens with 2 near misses at Sydney airport

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Two near-collisions between taxiing aircraft at Sydney Airport have prompted investigations by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB), amid continuing disruption linked to longstanding air traffic control (ATC) staffing shortages.

Around 7 a.m. Sunday morning, a Jetstar A320 preparing to depart for the Gold Coast and a Qatar Airways Boeing 777 were forced to stop abruptly to avoid collision on intersecting taxiways. Photos of the stationary aircraft on the tarmac appear to show them within metres of each other.

The sudden stop resulted in a Jetstar cabin crew member, who was not seated at the time, sustaining a wrist injury, which required medical attention. None of the 180 passengers on board the Jetstar flight were injured.

A Jetstar spokesperson said, “Our aircraft was following instructions by air traffic control when the pilots were forced to brake firmly after another aircraft came in close proximity.”

The Qatar aircraft, which was being towed to a remote gate for layover between flights, had no passengers or cabin crew on board. The 777’s front landing gear and the tug were damaged in the emergency stop and the aircraft was unable to proceed.

This is the second near miss at Sydney airport in less than two weeks. On July 27, around 8 a.m., a QantasLink Bombardier Dash 8 Q400 arriving from Canberra was completing its landing roll when air traffic control cleared a Qantas Boeing 737, preparing to depart for Queenstown, to cross the same runway. At the last minute, ATC alerted the crew of both planes to the mistake and the Boeing 737 was able to stop in time, but only after it had crossed the safety hold point.

A collision between a landing aircraft and a taxiing aircraft was narrowly averted, but the incident again underscores the potential consequences when safety

margins are eroded at Australia’s busiest airport.

The causes of both events remain under investigation. However, they have occurred amid protracted staffing and operational pressures at Airservices Australia, the federal agency responsible for air navigation services and air traffic control at Sydney Airport and most other major airports in the country.

Sydney Airport faced major delays on Friday, when some flights were delayed for as long as 80 minutes, and Saturday, when more than 150 flights were delayed.

The disruption occurred after Airservices was forced by “roster constraints” to implement Air Traffic Flow Management (ATFM) measures, reducing the number of arrivals and departures from the Airport’s usual capacity. While the agency did not directly cite staff shortages as the cause of the delays, it said in a statement, “Airservices is enhancing our training pipeline to add further controllers to improve roster depth.”

“There’s just not enough air traffic controllers at Sydney Airport,” Scott Nugent, president of the Civil Air union, told the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

“They are, and have been for a long time, relying on air traffic controllers doing overtime, some of them doing 10 shifts on, and then one day off, over and over, in order to keep the tower running properly.”

Industry lobbyists say the recent Sydney incidents are far from an aberration. “Airlines and airports continue to report network-wide delays and cancellations caused by insufficient air traffic control staffing, and aircraft held on the ground and in airborne holding for extended periods. These are not isolated incidents, and point to systemic and increasingly frequent failures,” Airlines for Australia and New Zealand chief executive Stephen Beckett and Australian Airports Association chief executive Simon Westaway recently wrote to Airservices.

The *Australian* quoted an anonymous air traffic controller who said he received “multiple messages a day

on every one of his days off from managers trying to fill shifts. ... Unfortunately, morale is at an all-time low and manager turnover is high.”

These pressures will only intensify with the opening of Western Sydney International Airport to passenger flights on October 25. Rather than confronting the staffing crisis, governments and aviation management are pressing ahead with an expansion of operations dependent on the same overstretched workforce.

Responding to Sunday’s occurrence, New South Wales (NSW) Premier Chris Minns said, “Not just the safety risks, but we want to make sure the airport is operating at full capacity. That’s hugely important for our economy.” He said he was “hopeful that there’s a plan in place to recruit more people for a highly specialised but very important job.”

While the state Labor government has no direct responsibility for Airservices, the Premier’s remarks express the outlook shared by the federal Labor government: The profitability of the aviation industry takes precedence over resolving the underlying conditions confronting workers and passengers. But expressions of hope are no substitute for a properly staffed and resourced public safety system.

Airservices Australia is a government-owned organisation funded through charges levied on airlines. It manages a vast area of airspace around the Australian continent and operates two major control centres, in Brisbane and Melbourne, as well as airport control towers and aviation rescue and firefighting services.

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, when air traffic was sharply reduced, Airservices introduced a retirement incentive scheme to push out employees aged 56 to 65. This led to the departure of more than 140 experienced air traffic controllers and support staff between late 2021 and mid-2022. This short-sighted cost cutting measure and loss of senior personnel severely depleted the agency’s expertise.

In September last year, Sydney Airport came close to being totally shut down on a Friday afternoon, as not enough air traffic controllers were available to allow those working to take their mandatory breaks. The crisis was narrowly averted with just an hour to spare, when an off-duty controller was eventually found to cover the gap.

The short staffing means the air traffic control system is a fragile balancing act. If even a few controllers are absent due to illness or other reasons the entire national aviation grid can grind to a halt. This is not a temporary aberration but the outcome of years of efficiency drives, budget cuts

and the subordination of essential public infrastructure to the commercial demands of the airlines.

The two Sydney occurrences demand a thorough independent investigation, including into staffing levels, rostering, fatigue, training, supervisory arrangements and the operational decisions made by management.

The safety record of Australian aviation rests on the skill and vigilance of controllers, pilots, cabin crews, ground staff and other workers. But it cannot be indefinitely sustained while workers are subjected to mounting workloads, disrupted leave and pressure to fill shifts at short notice.

Civil Air and other aviation union bureaucracies have overseen job cuts, productivity demands and efficiency measures across the aviation industry for decades.

Air traffic controllers need to establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus, to fight for safe staffing levels and enforceable limits on hours and fatigue, as well as improved real wages and working conditions. This is inseparable from a fight to reverse the corporatisation of Airservices—effectively privatisation by stealth—which means its priorities are shaped by the profit interests of the industry rather than the safety of passengers and crew.

This struggle should be connected to a broader fight against the capitalist system and the subordination of human need to the profit demands of big business.

The alternative is a fight by the working class for socialism, under which critical public infrastructure and industries, including the whole aviation sector, are placed under democratic workers’ control and public ownership.



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