

On the eve of the Olympics

Sydney's airport baggage handling system "an international joke"

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2 September 2000

A defective baggage handling system at Sydney's Kingsford Smith Airport, the major international terminal for Olympic travellers, is causing serious disruptions to flights and fuelling fears that the airport will not be able to cope during the Games.

Staff at the airport claim that the system is not equipped to deal with the added burden during the Olympics and that passengers will face excessive delays if it breaks down. Responsibility for this situation lies with the federal government and the Sydney Airport Corporation Ltd (SACL), which are preoccupied with developing profitable areas in the airport's operations, in preparation for privatisation, and at the expense of basic airport services.

The \$43 million baggage handling system, which has repeatedly malfunctioned since it was installed in May, was part of a \$600 million upgrade of the airport's facilities in preparation for the Olympics. The initial purchase of computer software for the system was overseen by construction consortium, Bovis Lend Lease, which contracted its introduction to a Dutch company.

Claims by SACL officials that they thoroughly tested the software before it was introduced are belied by the fact that basic problems were not detected. The system began operating six months behind schedule, giving the airport little time to iron out problems before the huge influx of passengers expected in September. Baggage handlers banned the system shortly after its installation due to safety concerns when bags were thrown off the belts, threatening to injure workers and passengers.

On July 1, 6,500 international passengers were delayed and 2,000 pieces of luggage left behind when the system collapsed for 11 hours. Some of this luggage

did not reach its destination until a week later and passengers on incoming flights were affected for up to 48 hours. After a spate of similar breakdowns in July, SACL assured staff and the public that all problems would be fixed by the end of the month. The situation, however, has continued to deteriorate.

The system broke down five times in August, while more than 3,200 bags, or 61 a day, have gone astray in the past two months. This is 20 times higher than the international standard, which determines that no more than three bags a day should miss flights. The problems have been attributed to computer software failure and electrical faults.

Staff, who bear the brunt of public anger over the long delays and inconvenience, are forced to manhandle luggage up to four times—from trolleys onto trucks and then onto containers at the rear of aircraft—when the equipment fails. These difficulties have been compounded by false information issued by SACL. According to SACL officials, a breakdown on August 20 caused a 10-minute delay, and only 17 bags were left behind. In fact, airport staff told the media that flights were delayed for up to 80 minutes and at least 200 bags, and possibly hundreds more, were left behind.

"It has been hell out here," one baggage handler told the *Sydney Morning Herald*. "When the system went down at 7am they tried to tell us it would be fixed within 10 minutes. Nothing happened for two hours. Just after 9am they said it was OK and it wasn't, and we had to shut it down again for nearly an hour. We keep being abused for daring to criticise or warn SACL that they have problems and need people on hand in case something breaks down. Their assurances mean nothing

and if they don't start listening the Olympics are going to be even worse. We are rapidly becoming an international joke.”

In the wake of the latest breakdowns an additional \$2 million was allocated to fix the recurring problems. These actions are not motivated by any concern for the public but by federal government plans to sell the airport, which is estimated to be worth \$4 billion. The government is anxious to ensure that everything functions smoothly during the Olympics period.

Successive Liberal and Labor governments, which have been preparing to sell the airport over the last two decades, corporatised the single department that previously oversaw the industry and implemented major cost-cutting and the contracting out of basic services. While basic airport operations have been neglected, the more lucrative airport operations have received increased funding.

SACL, which was formed in 1998 to manage the airport and prepare it for sale, has overseen a major expansion in the retail sector. Retailing now provides the largest profits for international airport operations, with 65 percent of Sydney airport's revenue derived from shopping, parking and property. The airport has over 137 shops and, in terms of turnover, is Australia's third-largest retail centre.

While millions of dollars have been spent to ensure that the airport looks good for the Olympics, basic services cannot be guaranteed. As one airport source commented: “No-one is complaining about the way the airport looks, but they have forgotten about the fact that it is an airport first and a shopping centre second.”

SACL's overriding concern with profit, at the expense of basic services, is demonstrated by the fact that the baggage system has no adequate backup when it fails and no storage facilities. The system, according to staff, will not be able to handle demands for security checks during the Olympics and the new x-ray equipment has significantly contributed to the number of bags missing flights.

There are also problems with wheel chair access to the terminal and overcrowding on the tarmac due to SACL's decision to adopt the minimum wing-tip clearance between aircraft of 7.5 metres. The number of baggage carousels has been reduced by one, despite the fact that aircraft bays have increased by 10. Staff are predicting that incoming passengers will face long

queues and may be forced to locate their baggage on the floor of the immigration area.

While additional baggage handlers have been employed to move bags from carousels and assist passengers locate their luggage during the Olympics, they will be of little help if the baggage handling system collapses during the peak period.

During a normal weekend Sydney's Kingsford Smith Airport handles approximately 18,000 pieces of luggage. On September 14 and 15, however, an estimated 75,000 bags will pass through the terminal as planes arrive every six minutes. Policies pursued by consecutive Liberal and Labor governments over the last 10 years have created the conditions whereby a major international airport cannot operate efficiently in normal conditions. They have paved the way, not just for major delays and inconveniences, but for more serious threats to passenger and staff safety.



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