



MEDIA RELEASE

Rail & Maritime Transport Union

18 October 2019

Rail workers mark twenty years since fatal Waipahi collision

On Wednesday morning, 20 October 1999, Graeme White had no reason to believe it was a day different from any other.

Employed as a train driver by Tranz Rail, privately owned predecessor of modern KiwiRail, he was working aboard southbound intercity express Train 919 which sat stationary on the Main South Line at Waipahi station.

At about 7.02am, northbound Train 938 entered the station and collided head-on with Train 919, still stationary on the main track.

Graeme White was killed. The locomotive engineer driving Train 938 suffered serious injuries.

The Rail & Maritime Transport Union will mark the occasion and mourn Mr White's loss at noon on Sunday 20 October 2019, with a commemorative service at the Waipahi memorial site.

A special train departs from Dunedin Railway Station on Sunday morning taking friends and family of the affected workers to the event, along with representatives of the RMTU and KiwiRail.

At the time of the crash, rail workers were exempt from workplace health and safety laws that covered other parts of the economy.

The Transport Services Licensing Act required rail employers only to ensure 'safety at a reasonable cost'.

“If you allow employers to assess safety options in terms of how much money it might cost them, there will always be an incentive to put profit first and safety second,” says RMTU National Secretary Wayne Butson.

“For rail workers in the corporatised and privatised network of the 1990s and early 2000s, we had to measure that reasonable cost in the coffins of our friends and colleagues. Whether at Waipahi or Pike River, workers should not have to die before safety is taken seriously.”

The tragedy at Waipahi, alongside the deaths of 15 Tranz Rail employees and serious injuries to another 60 between 1993 and 2000, led to the formation of a [Ministerial Inquiry](#) into Tranz Rail’s safety record.

This inquiry was ordered by Minister of Labour Margaret Wilson in consultation with union leader Ross Wilson and the rail company itself, and after [identifying a number of significant safety failures](#) the inquiry led directly to concrete procedural improvements that have protected workers in the industry since.

“The contrast between then and now is stark. We must never become complacent and allow safety standards to slip back to those dark days,” says Mr Butson.

“Through the High Performance, High Engagement system built between our union and KiwiRail, rail workers now have a way to raise concerns and ensure their voice is heard about safety and other issues without fear of repercussion.”

Background

There was only one track for both north and southbound trains, but Waipahi Station had a passing loop - a parallel section of track diverging from the main line, which Train 938 should have moved onto to allow it to pass Train 919 safely.

The [Transport Accident Investigation Commission’s report](#) (between pages 99 and 122) and its [accompanying addendum](#) concluded the trains arrived at Waipahi Station almost simultaneously, and that White’s locomotive could not have been stationary for longer than one minute before the collision.

This means Mr White did not have time to set the mainline points for the passing loop, and therefore did not have time to avoid the collision that took his life.

Trains avoided collisions in those days by following what a [1996 Land Transport Safety Authority report](#) described as a “low cost” Track Warrant Control (TWC) system, still widely used in KiwiRail today.

Locomotive movements were supervised from a central or regional control room, with the drivers of particular trains informed over the radio that they had permission to safely pass through a section of track.

Concerns were raised in LTSA safety audits of Tranz Rail's procedures, focusing on factors such as the absence of a requirement for the drivers of both trains to radio each other directly before passing at a station such as Waipahi.

There were also concerns regarding the infrequency of refresher training in how to properly operate the Track Warrant Control system, and Tranz Rail employees said fear of employer retaliation discouraged them from identifying safety issues in general.

On multiple occasions in the 1990s and 2000, Tranz Rail responded to these concerns from regulatory agencies with the threat of legal challenge.

Since being brought back into public ownership and in the wake of determined campaigning from the trade union movement, the safety record of New Zealand's national rail carrier has notably improved.

"We are pleased that progress has been made, and recognise the dedication shown by KiwiRail and union leadership to developing workplace practices that value staff and get them home to their families after clocking out," says Mr Butson.

"What Waipahi teaches us is that we must never grow complacent. One worker injured or killed is one too many. Never forget what happened, and never let it happen again."

ENDS

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