

On the picket line at Maintrain

Bitter lessons from years of job destruction

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The *World Socialist Web Site* last week spoke to striking workers on the picket line at the Maintrain plant in the Sydney suburb of Auburn, where a private company has the contract to repair and maintain the New South Wales metropolitan and intra-state passenger train fleet.

The strike, now in its seventh week, centres on the demand that the company guarantee workers' entitlements, such as annual and long service leave and severance pay, in the case of bankruptcy or closure.

After a short time at the picket, it is apparent that the Maintrain workforce includes a mosaic of workers from numerous workplaces that have closed or shed jobs over the past decade. Their experiences reflect fundamental changes in the structure and conditions of employment that have destroyed tens of thousands of permanent jobs and led to the growth of a part-time and casualised workforce.

Many of the workers had been in and out of jobs before coming to Maintrain, or had worked as on-call casual labour. They know that the company could collapse at any time, or fail to regain the government contract, leaving them high and dry without jobs or entitlements.

On the picket were workers who had been retrenched from large enterprises, such as Garden Island Naval Dockyards and the Goodyear tyre plant, as well as other major workshops once regarded as places where one had a job for life, and a myriad of smaller plants that had closed down or cut back their workforces. Some workers had come from Britain over the past six years, hoping to find secure employment.

Others had been retrenched from the state government railway workshops, after the unions collaborated with the state Labor government to shut down their workplaces and outsource their work to

private firms, such as Maintrain. Workers' entitlements were not at risk in the government rail workshops, because they were largely guaranteed. At Maintrain, however, the issue is a burning one.

Fitter Andrew Malkus had been sent to Maintrain as a contract worker and had only gained a permanent position six days before the strike broke out.

While he did not have much in the way of accrued entitlements, he said: "I feel it is right to support the other guys here in this dispute. In the long run, it will benefit everyone if entitlements are protected.

"You need to be protected—not only entitlements, but also job security. I worked in the railway workshops but I left and have been doing contract work. The money can be good but there is no permanency.

"There should be no argument about protecting workers' entitlements. The money is ours. The companies use it interest-free to fund their operations. When they go down, the workers are the last in line to get anything. Banks do not give unsecured loans to companies but workers are expected to."

Referring to the recent strike at car component manufacturer Tristar, which brought the car industry to a standstill before the company struck a deal with the unions to take out an insurance bond to cover entitlements, Malkus remarked: "Insurance companies themselves can go broke. Look at HIH Insurance [Australia's largest general insurance company, which collapsed this year, owing up to \$4 billion]. That was a big operator, but it went down owing millions."

"This has to be a national campaign because the question affects everyone. I don't want to leave here and end up at another company and do this all over again. After the people at National Textiles lost their entitlements the ACTU [Australian Council of Trade Unions] said it would begin a national campaign. It has

done nothing. If the AMWU [Australian Manufacturing Workers Union] is serious, it should call a national stoppage.”

WSWS spoke to a group of workers who had worked previously in various government railway workshops. Some had drawn some sharp conclusions about the role of the Labor Party and the unions, including their own, the AMWU.

One said he did not believe that the state Labor government was attempting to help them. “We are here because the government closed many rail workshops and destroyed permanent jobs and two weeks ago finally closed the locomotive workshops. Before, we had no trouble with entitlements because we worked for the rail. Now, we are forced to protect them. I was moved when the Eveleigh workshops closed down, then Locomotive went, and now I am here.

“We went on demonstrations many times to the state parliament to protest against the privatisation of the workshops. The Labor Party took no notice and went ahead anyway. They do not care for the workers. They are distant. Premier Bob Carr came to the picket and asked, ‘who runs this place?’ It was the state government that destroyed the workshops and awarded the contract to Maintrain.”

Another member of the group said the unions had assisted the government to destroy fulltime jobs in the rail workshops. “The NSW Labor Council and the AMWU helped to carry out an ‘orderly closure’ of the Electric Car workshops. I do not expect much from the unions. As far as I am concerned, we are alone.”

“The union officials told us that this is a national campaign, and we are the spearhead. Then they said that it must be kept at an enterprise level because a national strike is forbidden under the Howard government’s Workplace Relations Act. But the unions do not confront the legislation and they allowed it to be introduced without challenge.”



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