

Australia: Rail unions cave in amid furor over disruption to Pope's visit

Terry Cook
17 July 2008

Even in the annals of union treachery, the decision by rail unions in New South Wales (NSW) to call off industrial action and cave in to the state Labor government sets something of a record. Labor and union leaders cynically used the threat of disruption to this week's Catholic World Youth Day extravaganza in Sydney to pave the way for an agreement that amounts to a real wage cut.

In a secret ballot that concluded on July 2, rail workers voted overwhelmingly—95 percent in favour—for industrial action for a 5 percent pay rise to compensate for the soaring cost of living. Negotiations had already dragged on for 11 months with the Labor government offering 4 percent—less than the official inflation rate—tied to the axing of 417 jobs.

As Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) secretary Nick Lewocki acknowledged in an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, his members “knew that industrial action would be taken during World Youth Day”. When the date for the strike—July 17, the day the Pope is due to make his first major public appearance—was finally announced on July 7, Lewocki was already on the back foot, declaring that the union knew it was “a terrible time” for a strike.

The announcement was greeted with a torrent of denunciations and threats by the media, big business and politicians, state and federal. The prospect that World Youth Day would be disturbed simply could not be countenanced. The state government had heavily subsidised the event and imposed draconian security regulations. Business, photo opportunities for politicians and the reputation of Sydney as a venue for international spectacles were all at stake.

NSW Labor Premier Morris Iemma launched a tirade against the strike as “industrial terror,” declaring that the government would not be “blackmailed”. “The threat to embarrass the state on one of the most important days in

our recent history will not cut ice with the government,” Iemma ranted.

He was joined by NSW Opposition Leader Barry O'Farrell who called on the government to invoke essential services legislation, under which striking workers could be fined. “The essential services legislation was put in place precisely to stop this sort of action occurring where the public is being held to ransom.”

NSW Business Chamber executive officer Kevin MacDonald dubbed the decision to strike a “cheap shot” that would “damage the city's international reputation”.

To cap it off, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd waded into the dispute, declaring: “Australia is honored to have the Holy Father with us. All of Australia, including those in this particular union, I believe should treat him with respect.” Rudd has already made clear his hostility to pay rises, insisting that working people have to sacrifice and accept wage restraint in the face of soaring prices for petrol, food and every other cost of living.

The Labor and union apparatus in NSW quickly swung into action. Transport Minister John Watkins, who is also deputy premier, had already asked the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) to use provisions contained in the former Howard government's hated “WorkChoices” laws to terminate the bargaining period for the rail workers. Such a move would have made the strike illegal and opened the way for huge fines and other punitive measures.

As the media ratcheted up the campaign against “industrial terrorism” on July 8, with headlines such as “Devil's Work” in the *Daily Telegraph*, the government went into the IRC. After three hours of closed-door talks with Watkins, the rail union announced that the strike had been called off. Following the meeting, Unions NSW secretary John Robertson declared what had been agreed was “a win” for workers and commuters alike.

It was far from a victory for workers, however. In a July

10 column published by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Watkins said the government had withdrawn its demand for immediate job cuts, “only on agreement that the parties commit to a wage offer of 2.5 percent, and that any increases above that are subject to productivity improvements”. In other words, the RTBU has now accepted the state government’s across-the-board pay ceiling of 2.5 percent—the first union to do so—and that rail workers will have to sacrifice jobs and conditions to receive any further increase.

After meeting with union leaders, Watkins stated that they had accepted that job losses were inevitable. He told the media: “There’s going to be reform in the industry during the next two years, which will mean jobs disappearing from other parts of the organisation. If we can identify those job losses, we can feed that into the EBA [Enterprise Bargaining Agreement]. That was accepted as a principle.”

In an attempt to cover-up the unions’ abject capitulation, RTBU state secretary Lewocki told journalists there had been “movement on quite a number of areas”. However, when questioned by the WSWS, Lewocki said the union could “cope with sensible change and reform”. He admitted the union would put in place a series of “reform issues” over two years in return for “productivity credits” from the government.

These would include the “repositioning of jobs”—that is, the elimination of positions through the transfer of staff made “surplus to requirement” by new technology such as ticketing machines and other cost-cutting measures. Other workers would be allocated extended duties or have their job definitions reclassified. The union will also accept the greater use of private firms and contract labour in areas such as track building.

The astonishing speed of the RTBU’s back down demonstrates that the union was never going to wage a serious campaign. Instead it used the media furor over disrupting World Youth Day to mask its sell-out. Lewocki’s apologetic comments about understanding that “the public is angry” were in marked contrast to actual public sentiment.

While the entire political and media establishment has been kowtowing to that bastion of reaction known as the Catholic Church, a batch of letters fired off to the ABC website gave a glimpse of the considerable sympathy for the strikers and hostility to World Youth Day, the state government and its gross mismanagement of the rail system.

Honing in on Rudd’s call for respect for the Pope, one

declared: “Methinks that Kevin [Rudd] might be well advised to stop pontificating and show the rail-workers some respect. Why should an ex-Hitler-youth member now wearing a frock be entitled to more respect than a rail-man trying to get a fair deal for a working family in Australia?”

Another added: “Neither the state nor federal government has shown any respect to Sydneysiders with regards to the monumental disruption they have caused to an already overburdened public transport system. As a rail commuter I support the strike.”

A third commented: “Go for it guys—when the NSW government shows consideration to the citizens it purports to represent, by consulting us about public funding of a Catholic event, then they will be deserving of your respect.” And there were many others in similar vein—all in the short space of time before the union caved in.

One last point needs to be made. Iemma’s branding of a perfectly legitimate strike as “industrial terror” is an ominous warning of what is being prepared. The *World Socialist Web Site* has repeatedly pointed out that the draconian anti-terror laws introduced by the previous Howard government with Labor’s backing were so broad that they could be applied to any political opposition, including strikes by workers.

Under conditions where the state and federal Labor administrations are deepening the attacks on living standards, they are prepared not only to wield punitive workplace laws more ruthlessly than the Liberals but to demonise workers as “terrorists,” opening the way for using unprecedented measures against strikers, including detention and interrogation without charge.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact