

Australian state government axes 750 rail jobs

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The Liberal state government in New South Wales (NSW) has announced the destruction of 750 railway jobs as part of a major overhaul of the state-owned RailCorp aimed at laying the groundwork for privatisation. Railway workers are being targeted as a key component of a wider offensive against public sector workers—an agenda fully backed by the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

According to NSW Transport Minister Gladys Berejiklian, the job cuts in middle management are aimed at “improving frontline services” and making RailCorp “more customer focused.” In reality, the announcement is another step in the restructuring of public transport that has undermined the jobs and conditions of workers and worsened services for commuters.

Last August, the government rammed the Transport Legislation Amendment Bill through the state parliament’s upper house. Roads and Ports Minister Duncan Gay told the Legislative Council that the bill contained “the most significant restructure of transport in the history of this great state.” It established a new integrated transport authority, Transport for NSW, a “super-department” with the power to contract out all public transport services, including “non-core services” such as administration.

Transport for NSW takes over the coordination and procurement functions of all the main public transport agencies, including the Department of Transport, RailCorp, the Roads and Traffic Authority, the State Transit Authority, Sydney Ferries, the Maritime Authority of New South Wales, the Transport Construction Authority and the Country Rail Infrastructure Authority.

The stated purpose of this “consolidation of functions” is “fewer people in the back office and more on the front line.” However, the divisive tactic of pitting frontline workers against administrative staff is nothing more than a diversion from the real agenda of privatisation and cost-cutting.

Under the measures announced by Transport Minister Berejiklian on May 15, RailCorp’s country train services will be split from metropolitan rail, creating NSW Trains and Sydney Trains. The plan effectively completes the restructuring begun in 1988 by a National-Liberal government with the separation of the State Rail Authority (SRA) into CityRail and CountryLink. The state’s rail freight services were subsequently privatised by the Carr Labor government, following the creation in 1996 of FreightCorp.

Privatisation and cost-cutting will now be extended to country and metropolitan rail services. The initial target is the railway cleaning services. RailCorp’s 870 staff in Presentation Services will now be transferred to a “specialist subsidiary unit to attack graffiti and rubbish on trains and stations.” RailCorp boss Rob Mason has revealed that “appropriate management processes and systems [are] to be externally sourced to better support cleaning staff to do their jobs.” This, along with the “new commercial cleaning benchmarks” will inevitably pave the way for privatisation.

Premier Barry O’Farrell’s rail plans are a continuation and deepening of nearly three decades of privatisation begun by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments in the 1980s that included the fire-sale of Qantas, the Commonwealth Bank and Telstra.

In 1988, the NSW Greiner government commissioned consultancy firm Booz Allen Hamilton to prepare a

report on the viability of the then State Rail Authority. It recommended slashing 8,000 jobs throughout the railways. Almost two and a half decades later, O'Farrell has used the same firm (now called Booz & Co), at a cost of \$6.5 million, to justify one of the largest slash-and-burn operations in the history of the NSW railways.

The latest restructure announced on May 15 is just the initial stage of a broader agenda, with Booz & Co recommending the government eliminate 4,500 of RailCorp's 15,000 workers. Yet the content of this report, drawn up at tax payers' expense, is being kept secret by the O'Farrell government. In an extraordinary move, the NSW Department of Transport has denied freedom of information applications by the *Sydney Morning Herald* to obtain a copy of the complete Booz & Co report recommendations.

As with previous restructuring carried out in the NSW railways, the O'Farrell government will rely on the unions to ram through the sackings, cost-cutting and privatisation. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s it was the rail unions that were the chief enforcers of government sackings and closures resulting in the destruction of more than 10,000 jobs, the closure of "unprofitable" rail lines and of railway workshops including Eveleigh and Chullora.

According to Australian Services Union (ASU) secretary Sally McManus, last month's announcement "reeks of the first step towards privatisation." Yet no campaign to defend jobs will be undertaken by the unions. On the contrary, in the face of a co-ordinated assault on rail workers, including cleaners, transit workers and middle management, not a single mass meeting of rail workers has been called.

The outlook of the unions was summed up by McManus's pathetic declaration that the "Transport Minister stood in front of us today and said that she wouldn't privatise the service before she takes it to the public at an election. We'll be holding her to that." Yet as McManus and the rail unions know full well, the plans to privatise are well advanced and will be implemented regardless of whether Labor or Liberal holds office.

Across Australia, state governments are enforcing massive cuts to public spending in line with the Gillard government's insistence that the federal budget be brought into surplus. The cuts are part of a global agenda of austerity as the ruling elites seek to place the burden of the global economic collapse onto the backs of working people. In Britain, for instance, the Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition plans to destroy 20,800 rail jobs on top of the 10,000 already announced by the previous Labour government in 2009.

In order to defend jobs, rail workers need to mobilise independently of and in direct opposition to the unions that will work to enforce the government's restructure plans. Independent rank-and-file committees should be formed, linking rail workers with other sections of workers under attack, in a unified political and industrial campaign against the O'Farrell and Gillard governments.

The only way that rail jobs and public transport services can be defended is in the fight for a workers' government to implement socialist policies, including placing the banks and major industry under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class. Only in that way can cheap, efficient public transport be guaranteed, along with decent jobs and conditions for transport workers.



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