

Australian rail union responds to Pacific National lockout by resuming talks

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The Rail Train and Bus Union (RTBU) responded to a lockout of Pacific National's Victorian freight train drivers last week by limiting industrial action to two token work bans and agreeing to resume back-room negotiations with the company for eight weeks.

The union's latest manoeuvre is aimed at suppressing widespread anger among freight train drivers over a new Pacific National (PN) Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA). The proposed EBA covering PN's Victorian rural and bulk division reportedly slashes a raft of working conditions and lays the basis for major wage cuts.

The RTBU called a 48-hour strike on May 1 to protest against the EBA. PN threatened a lockout of all freight train drivers.

Business figures have complained that the industrial action was obstructing transport of a record grain crop in Victoria. Wakefield Transport, a Victorian freight company, which uses PN's trains, reported that it carried out an additional 634 truck trips last week, in a bid to prevent the strike affecting freight movement.

Earlier work bans in March and April had resulted in the cancellation of up to 30 freight train journeys. This affected Victoria's main bulk handlers, including Emerald Grain, GrainCorp and AWB GrainFlow.

In comments to the press on the eve of last week's strike, Marc Marotta, the secretary of the RTBU's Victorian locomotive division, made clear the union was seeking to reach a deal with the company. "I wish there was another way around this but that's the legal framework in which we work," he said.

PN nevertheless proceeded with the week-long lockout, in an attempt to bludgeon the workforce into accepting the terms of the EBA.

Speaking to the WSWWS on Friday, Marotta indicated that the union had made an offer to PN last Tuesday for

the resumption of talks. He said the company rejected the overture. Two days later, however, on Thursday, PN agreed to new negotiations.

The union has pledged not to take any strike action over the next eight weeks and has scaled back work bans, which now only cover the use of casual labor, and shunter operations at the Appleton docks in Melbourne. The company has not made any concessions.

In other words, the union responded to the lockout, a significant attack on the rights of the workforce, by abetting the company's attempts to prevent any industrial action against the new EBA, and reassuring PN's clients that their activities will not face any disruptions.

Freight train services to Victorian ports resumed yesterday. Underscoring the fealty of the union to the company and the major agribusinesses it services, Marotta made groveling comments cited in the *Weekly Times*. The strike was a "last resort," he said, adding, "We'd like to apologize to grain growers."

Asked by the WSWWS whether there was hostility to the resumption of talks among workers, Marotta said: "To be candid, there's a small minority that is so angry, they have allowed their personal feelings to cloud their judgment. There is quite a level of animosity towards the company." His comments indicate that the union will use the eight-week negotiating period to try and dissipate anger among the workforce, and reach a sellout agreement with PN.

While few details of the proposed EBA have been released, the union claims that it includes sweeping wage cuts of up to \$19,000 per year for freight train drivers, and the scaling back of conditions, including travel allowances.

According to the union, the wage cuts equate to about \$10 an hour. Experienced drivers are currently on a rate

of \$52.74 an hour. The aggregate wage includes shift and weekend penalties and other allowances. The RTBU has said that the new EBA is seeking to remove a number of these from the aggregate wage, in an attempt to lower it to \$42.58.

The company's demands are in line with the attacks carried out at other industrial workplaces, where companies have sought to force employees onto a base rate of pay.

In February, the Fair Work Commission, the industrial tribunal created by the last Labor government with the support of the unions, endorsed AGL's move to tear-up an EBA covering workers at its Loy Yang A power station in Victoria's Latrobe Valley. The ruling has cleared the way for pay cuts of between 30 and 65 percent, with the highly skilled workforce facing the prospect of receiving the base rate of pay for an electrician.

The attack on Victoria's PN workers is part of a broader offensive by the company against jobs, wages and conditions in response to the fall in commodity prices and the resulting decline in freight volumes. PN is also pushing a new national EBA for its internodal division, which is aimed at instituting driver-only operation of trains, which would slash staff, and increasing part-time work.

Last year, ports and rail corporate group Asciano sold off PN to a consortium of major international investors, which included Global Infrastructure Management, the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board, British Columbia Investment Management Corporation and China's CIC Capital Corporation.

In the lead-up to the sale, Asciano initiated a cost-cutting drive to secure savings of between \$150 million to \$300 million from 2014-18. This included cutting 46 jobs at its Newcastle operations in New South Wales (NSW) and another 160 in the company's bulk operations.

The cuts were intensified last year, following the takeover, with an announcement in November of an additional 120 sackings across PN's NSW operations. It axed 67 jobs at the Port Waratah coal-haulage operation in Newcastle, along with 23 in Port Kembla, and others in NSW regional centres.

Similar measures have been imposed by PN's competitors, including the Queensland-based freight-haulage company, Aurizon. In 2015, it announced a

major restructure, including the slashing of 800 jobs, aimed at cost-savings of up to \$380 million. Those sackings followed over 2,000 job cuts at Aurizon between 2010 and 2015.

In every instance, the RTBU has collaborated with the major freight companies to suppress opposition from workers. It has called only token industrial action limited to individual workplaces, aimed at isolating workers in each division.

To the extent that the union has voiced opposition to the continuous restructuring at PN, it has been from the standpoint that it has not been consulted sufficiently. The union is particularly concerned that the rural and bulk EBA could limit its bargaining powers. In other words, the union is above all anxious to maintain its position at the negotiating table where it will continue to bargain away the jobs, wages and conditions of the workers it falsely claims to represent.

The record makes clear that a struggle against the offensive by PN and other freight companies can only take place through a rebellion against the RTBU. What is required are independent, rank-and-file committees completely independent of the union aimed at uniting workers across the sector to coordinate strike action, issue appeals to other workers facing similar attacks, and to discuss a political strategy to take the fight forward.

Above all, the relentless restructuring in the freight industry underscores the necessity for a workers' government, based on socialist policies, including placing the major mining, agribusiness, rail and infrastructure companies under public ownership and workers' control.



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