

Australian rail union suspends industrial action in Pacific National dispute

Terry Cook
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The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) last week suspended all industrial action while it continues negotiations for new enterprise agreements (EBAs) covering around 850 workers in Pacific National's coal and bulk cargo haulage divisions in New South Wales (NSW).

In September, workers voted overwhelming for a campaign of industrial action. More than 79 percent of eligible workers participated, underscoring the anger over the company's drive to cut back conditions.

The union's decision followed a two-hour conciliation meeting in the Fair Work Commission (FWC) industrial tribunal last Wednesday. The RTBU requested the talks on the pretext that the company withdrew from an agreement to negotiate a single EBA for both the coal and bulk divisions.

Earlier, the union lifted an "indefinite" overtime ban within 24 hours of it being imposed and abandoned two other work bans.

A 48-hour stoppage last weekend, the second this month, went ahead to give the impression that the RTBU will press the company hard in the new round of talks. There is considerable frustration among workers over the lack of progress in more than 30 rounds of negotiations in the past 10 months.

The FWC insisted there would be not be a single EBA covering both sections of the Pacific National workforce. Nor has the company shifted from its demand for the tearing up of working conditions. Nevertheless, the RTBU called off industrial action "as a sign of good faith."

The RTBU sought the involvement of the FWC, which the trade unions laud as an "independent umpire," to facilitate its efforts to broker yet another set of EBAs along the lines demanded by Pacific National (PN).

The FWC is anything but an "independent umpire." It is part of the repressive Fair Work Australia regime introduced by the last Labor government in 2009, with the full support of the unions.

Since its inception, the FWC has intervened in dispute after dispute, using its extensive powers to terminate industrial action and facilitate outcomes favourable to the employers. The unions involved then declared workers had no choice but to accept the result. The RTBU will no doubt rely on the FWC to carry out a similar intervention if it meets opposition from its members to the deal it eventually hatches with PN.

PN is demanding workers accept changes to ramp up the level of labour exploitation and impose ever-greater levels of workplace "flexibility."

These include the removal of all restrictions on the number of casuals and contract labour hires; a reduction in rostered weekends off; and the abolition of the right of train crews to refuse further work after eight hours on duty. Workers also would be required to work before or after scheduled shift times—arrangements known as "lifting up" and "laying back."

While the RTBU claims to be fighting to "keep and improve" conditions, its set of claims are deliberately lacking in detail, to allow it to more easily hand over concessions to PN. There is no actual pay demand, only a reference to "a fair and reasonable wage increase that recognises employees' contribution to the company." What is "reasonable" will be decided in horse-trading during negotiations, linked to trade-offs.

The union is calling only for a cap on casual and contract labour, but does not specify the level it will accept. The last EBA signed off by the RTBU in 2014 allowed PN to move to 49 percent casualisation. Workers found out about this only when a union official blurted it out to the media last November.

Far from opposing casualisation, the RTBU has facilitated it, by allowing the destruction of hundreds of permanent jobs across PN. These included 120 positions in the company's NSW operations last year, on top of 200 jobs shed in 2014.

These job cuts, like those at rival companies, have been achieved through union-sanctioned measures such as "voluntary" redundancies, redundancy "swaps" and redeployment—all of which the RTBU has agreed to retain in the new EBAs.

PN's attacks are part of a broader offensive by haulage and freight operators to cut jobs, wages and working conditions. The companies want to slash costs at workers' expense under conditions of a ruthless struggle for market share as the coal and mineral conglomerates and agribusinesses continuously demand lower prices.

Ports and rail corporate group Asciano sold off PN last year to a consortium of international investors. Before doing so, it carried out a cost-cutting drive, featuring severe job cuts, to save between \$150 million and \$300 million. In 2015, Queensland-based freight-haulage company Aurizon slashed 800 jobs in a restructure to save up to \$380 million, after axing 2,000 jobs between 2010 and 2015.

Halting the assault on jobs and conditions and ending the scourge of casualisation requires a unified struggle by workers across PN's operations nationally, together with all others employed in the haulage, freight and transport sector who face similar attacks.

The RTBU has worked to block such a development. In every instance, it has enforced the anti-strike provisions in the Fair Work laws. These make industrial action illegal except during EBA bargaining periods at individual enterprises.

The RTBU, along with all unions, has worked to ensure that all disputes remain firmly within the EBA framework introduced by Labor in the early 1990s, designed to end industry-wide campaigns. EBAs divide workers on an enterprise basis, allowing them to be played off against each other in a downward spiral of conditions.

In May for example, PN locked out freight train drivers in its rural and bulk division in the state of Victoria, as part of its drive to impose an EBA that slashed conditions and cut pay. The RTBU conducted no campaign among its members to oppose the lockout,

signalling to PN it could conduct similar assaults on other sections of workers.

To oppose the attacks by PN and other freight companies, workers need to make a decisive break with the unions and establish new organisations of struggle, such as independent workplace committees.

These organisations will fight to unite workers across the sector, turn out to other sections of the working class and begin a discussion on a new political strategy. At the centre of a counter-offensive has to be the fight 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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