

# Australian rail union collaborating with Pacific National to impose sell-out agreement

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The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) is working with Pacific National to push through a new enterprise agreement covering around 850 workers at the company's coal and bulk cargo haulage divisions in the state of New South Wales (NSW).

Pacific National workers should reject the deal, which erodes working conditions and wages. It was drawn up in weeks of closed-door negotiations after the union called off all industrial action at the end of October and held a conciliation meeting in the Fair Work Commission.

Pacific National (PN) has become one of Australia's largest freight companies following the privatisation of state government-owned freight operations in NSW, Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland since 2002. With the assistance of the unions, PN has aggressively restructured, cutting jobs and working conditions to slash costs, boost profits and expand its market share.

This agenda has driven the company's stance during the more than 10 months since the dispute in the NSW coal and bulk cargo divisions began. PN has demanded substantial cuts to working conditions and other measures giving it increased workplace control and "flexibility."

To date, the union has not circulated the proposed agreement to PN workers, so that workers cannot scrutinise it in detail before balloting begins, sometime in the coming weeks.

Instead, the RTBU issued a two-page *News Flash* bulletin on December 3 claiming that the union's negotiating team was "able to protect and in some instances improve all current Bulk and Coal conditions." The bulletin provides no details to support this assertion.

The bulletin said the union would "conduct a joint tour with Pacific National" at work sites "to explain the

outcome (of the negotiations) and answer questions." No explanation was provided as to why management, which has shown nothing but contempt for workers, is being given the floor at these meetings.

The union's decision to allow management to attend these site meetings is not about "answering questions." It is a crude attempt to intimidate workers before the official ballot and stifle opposition to yet another RTBU-PN cost-cutting deal.

The bulletin made no reference to PN's demands for less rostered weekends off, the removal of the right of train crews to refuse further work after eight hours on duty, and intensified requirements for workers to attend work earlier than scheduled shift times or stay after the official end of shifts.

The bulletin mainly referred to two issues—the increasing use of contract and casual labour and a 9 percent wage rise over four years

The creation of a two-tier workforce, in which casuals do not receive the benefits of full-time workers, putting downward pressure on conditions across the board, has generated widespread hostility among PN workers.

The union has facilitated casualisation. In 2014, the RTBU signed off on enterprise agreements that allowed the company to casualise up to 49 percent of the coal and bulk cargo divisions. PN workers became aware of this only after an RTBU official spoke to the media in November 2016.

The union bulletin claimed that this issue has been resolved through an agreement clause that states: "Pacific National shall assure, as far as is operationally practical, that permanent full-time employment shall be the main and preferred form of employment."

The carefully-crafted clause allows the company to structure the workforce on the basis of what is "operationally practical." In other words, to do

whatever is required to boost profits and share values.

The claim that permanent full-time employment is PN's "main and preferred form of employment" is bogus. In October 2016, PN sent a letter to Port Waratah drivers saying it had "made a definite decision to reduce our full-time positions... and to increase our use of flexible labour (labour hire and direct casuals) to meet above-average demand for labour."

During enterprise bargaining the union did not nominate a specific amount for a pay rise, declaring only it was seeking "a fair and reasonable wage increase." Such open-ended formulations provide unions with a means of accommodating to the company's demands.

The proposed enterprise pay increase of 9 percent over four years, or on average just 2.25 percent annually, barely matches the 1.9 percent official rate of inflation. It will be quickly eroded by rising electricity, medical, food and housing costs.

Joe, a PN worker who did not wish to use his real name for fear of company reprisal, told the *World Socialist Web Site* the casual and contract labour clause was an attempt "to pull the wool" over workers' eyes.

"The company often claims that these casuals are needed for seasonal or unplanned work but we see the use of casuals on regular services. Many of these people are second-person qualified only. When a driver is put with someone who is second-person only, who is not qualified to drive that route, they have to drive the train themselves for the whole shift."

Commenting on the precarious position of casuals, Joe said: "Most of the casuals I work with are not getting enough work and want full-time work. Some of them have other jobs, meaning they have to juggle their time."

The erosion of PN workers' jobs and conditions is part of an escalating offensive by the haulage and freight companies, backed by Liberal-National and Labor governments at federal and state levels. The mining companies and agribusinesses are constantly demanding lower haulage charges.

The defence of jobs and working conditions requires a fight to unify workers across PN's operations nationally, along with others in the haulage, freight and transport sector, all of whom face similar attacks.

The latest PN-RBTU agreement demonstrates that the union will oppose any such campaign. What is required

is a decisive political break with Labor and the unions, and the development of new organisations of struggle, such as independent rank and file committees.

As a first step, PN workers should decisively reject the RTBU's sell-out deal, take the conduct of the fight into their own hands and turn out to other sections of the working class facing similar attacks.

Central to developing a counter-offensive across the transport and logistics sector must be the fight for a workers' government to implement socialist policies, including placing the major mining, agribusiness, rail and infrastructure companies under public ownership and workers' control.



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