

Australia: New South Wales rail workers to strike for 24 hours

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Public sector rail workers across New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, are set to strike for 24 hours on January 29, the first such stoppage since 1999. They are fighting demands by the state Liberal-National government for cuts in real wages and the further erosion of conditions via a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

As many as 9,000 workers, including train drivers, guards and station staff, will participate in the stoppage, which is expected to bring transport and other activities across much of the state, including Sydney, to a halt.

Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) officials are desperately trying to find ways to call off the strike, just as it has prevented stoppages for the past two decades.

Tuesday's announcement of the strike triggered hysterical responses in ruling circles. The Sydney Business Chamber declared that the stoppage would be "simply outrageous" and cost the NSW economy \$100 million.

Liberal-National Transport Minister Andrew Constance said the decision by workers to strike was "extraordinary" and the government was examining "every possible option" to prevent the stoppage. His comments are a clear warning that the government is preparing to intervene, including through the pro-business industrial courts, to outlaw the strike.

State Labor Party leader Luke Foley yesterday solidarised himself with attempts to prevent the stoppage, saying the 6 percent annual pay rise being demanded by rail workers was "too much." He called on the RTBU officials, with whom he collaborates closely, to strike a "negotiated" agreement.

The financial and political establishment fears that the strike could become the focal point for a broader counter-offensive against the onslaught on jobs, wages and conditions that has been enforced by Labor and Liberal-National governments alike, state and federal, assisted by

the trade unions.

Rail workers have signalled their intent to fight the onerous working conditions they confront. Some 84 percent of Sydney Trains staff who voted in a ballot on January 12 backed strike action, along with 73 percent of NSW Trains drivers, who work outside Sydney. Among those who in favour of industrial action, substantial majorities supported an indefinite strike.

This is part of a broader discontent. This month, 3,000 Ausgrid power workers also voted overwhelmingly to take industrial action in NSW.

The RTBU is seeking to contain the anger among rail workers, by isolating them from other sections of the working class, including bus, ferry and freight train staff. The union announced the strike two weeks in advance, knowing it would set-off a firestorm of denunciations from the financial elite and the corporate press.

Union officials no doubt intend to use the furious reaction in order to cancel the stoppage on the pretext that any action will "inconvenience" commuters, particularly as January 29 is the first day back to school for thousands of students.

The RTBU has made no appeal for support from passengers, many of whom are workers facing the same assault on wages and conditions as rail staff. In this, the union has been assisted by an anti-democratic gag imposed by Sydney Trains and NSW Trains, banning rail staff from speaking out publicly.

On Tuesday, RTBU NSW Secretary Alex Classons demonstrated that the union's wages claim is a sham. He described the miserly 6 percent per annum pay rise, which exceeds the government's 2.5 percent pay cap for public servants, as "a bit out there." In other words, the union will agree to a far lower increase, regardless of its members' views.

Classons suggested that if "worse came to worse" and the strike went ahead, commuters should consider staying

home on January 29. The comment was a further indication that the union is seeking another sell-out agreement. Since the last strike in 1999, the union has collaborated in a series of pro-business restructures of the train system, enforcing the destruction of thousands of jobs.

With the help of the unions, successive Labor governments corporatised the rail system, privatised state-owned rail freight services and closed dozens of rail facilities, including maintenance workshops and track repair divisions.

In 2008, the RTBU, working with the state Labor government, called off strike action endorsed by 95 percent of Sydney train drivers, on the excuse that it would disrupt Catholic World Youth Day events. Workers were demanding a 5 percent per annum pay rise, and the withdrawal of 417 job cuts announced by Labor.

The RTBU struck a deal that provided for just a 2.5 percent rise, the first time a union had agreed to the newly-introduced public service pay cap. Labor's Transport Minister John Watkins said the agreement ensured "reform in the industry during the next two years," including sweeping job cuts.

The union has since collaborated with Liberal-National governments. In 2012, the union suppressed widespread opposition to 750 rail sackings, tied to stepped-up moves for the privatisation of the entire network.

In 2014, the union signed another regressive enterprise agreement, mandating average pay rises of just 3 percent, barely keeping pace with the rate of inflation. The deal provided for expanded contracting out of services and work, with no requirement that Sydney Trains hire more staff to keep pace with increased demand.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* this week revealed that there were just 22 more train drivers and guards last year, compared with 2013–14. Over the same period, a quarter of all station staff positions, over 500, have been destroyed.

The job cuts have created intolerable conditions for rail staff. Workers who spoke to the WSWS said it is common for drivers to work 12 consecutive days of ten-hour shifts each fortnight.

The introduction of a new timetable last November, combined with staff reductions, has produced chaos on the rail network over the past fortnight, increasing the pressure on workers. At the same time, workers have suffered an effective wage freeze since last August, when the previous enterprise agreement expired, and will not receive back-pay once a new agreement is signed.

The situation confronting NSW rail workers is paralleled across the country and internationally. In Britain and New Zealand, rail workers have taken strike action in recent months to fight cuts to conditions and jobs. In Australia, mass sackings have hit telecommunications, electricity, auto and other manufacturing workers.

In every instance, workers confront the trade unions as their enemies. Tied by a thousand threads to Labor and big business, the unions, based on a nationalist and pro-capitalist program, function as a police force of the corporations and governments. The record makes clear that the RTBU will do everything it can to suppress the opposition of rail workers, and prevent a stoppage.

The only way forward is for workers to take the preparation of the strike into their own hands. This includes the establishment of rank-and-file-workers' committees, independent of the unions, tasked with planning the industrial action, and turning out to every other section of workers.

Such committees would immediately confront major political issues, including the need to break with Labor and the unions. An opposed perspective is required to address the fact that the gutting of the railways, and the preparation for their privatisation, has been conducted in the interests of a corporate and financial elite, whose insatiable drive for profit dominates every aspect of life.

Only through the fight for a workers' government, which would implement socialist policies, including placing the banks and corporations under public ownership and democratic control, can a decent public transport system be established, including well-paid jobs with decent conditions for all staff.



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