# Australia: Union officials desperately trying to prevent NSW rail strike

**Oscar Grenfell**
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Officials from the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and Unions NSW have been engaged in backroom talks with the state Liberal-National Coalition government and train authorities over the past few days, in a desperate bid to block the scheduled January 29 strike of 9,000 Sydney and New South Wales rail workers.

The RTBU was compelled to call the stoppage after train workers voted overwhelmingly in favour of industrial action earlier this month, as part of a dispute over a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). After decades of pro-business restructuring in the railways, enforced by Labor, the Liberal-Nationals and the unions, the government is seeking to push through a deal that paves the way for further cuts to conditions and real wages.

The union called the strike for the day that the school year begins, and announced it a fortnight in advance. This was a calculated attempt to create the conditions to call off the action, on the grounds that it will inconvenience commuters. At the same time, the RTBU has done everything it can to isolate rail workers from other sections of the working class, including bus, ferry and freight train staff, who confront a similar assault on conditions and wages.

Now, the RTBU is openly campaigning to strike a sell-out deal with the government, which would inevitably deepen the assault on jobs, conditions and wages.

RTBU state secretary Alex Classens told the press that meetings yesterday with the Transport Minister Andrew Constance had been "respectful."

"We worked collaboratively with the Minister to hear what his issues were [and] he listened to what ours were," Classens said. He stated that Constance was committed to "try to resolve this mess, as we all are."

After meetings on Thursday, Classens and Mark Morey, head of the state umbrella organisation Unions NSW, explicitly stated that the unions were seeking to cancel the strike. They confirmed that they were trying to forge an agreement with the government this weekend, which they would attempt to force rail workers to accept next week.

The "collaborative" and "respectful" discussions between the union bureaucrats and Constance underscore the role of the RTBU as an arm of rail management, and an industrial police force of the government.

Classens fawning over Constance is particularly striking, given that the minister has repeatedly pledged to "stare down" rail workers, and is an open proponent of the complete privatisation of public transport. The minister has previously declared that he hopes for the complete automation of rail services, so that "we won't need train or bus drivers," and has been a key architect of the government's establishment of a privatised Metro trains system in Sydney, set to begin operations in 2019.

Underlying the RTBU's determined attempts to cancel the strike are intense fears that the stoppage could break the unions' protracted suppression of working-class struggles and become the focal point of a movement against the entire political establishment, and its program of sweeping austerity cuts.

To divert from the broader issues posed by the strike, union officials have sought to present it as primarily a wages dispute. Classens has already signalled the union's willingness to accept even less than its claim for a miserly six percent annual wage rise, stating this week that the figure was just a "starting point" and was "a bit out there."

In reality, the government's insistence on pay rises no greater than 2.5 percent per annum, barely above the

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rate of inflation, is part of a wholesale onslaught on the social rights of train workers, centring on the gutting of working conditions. This process is replicated in every industry, with the unions enforcing the government and corporate destruction of conditions won through years of workers' struggle.

As a result of regressive agreements struck by the RTBU, including in 2008 and 2014, which provide for ongoing restructures and the expanded use of contract labour, hundreds of jobs have been slashed across the Sydney and NSW rail network.

The 2008 deal was tied to the Labor government's demands for 417 rail job cuts. Labor's Transport Minister John Watkins hailed the agreement for ensuring "reform in the industry during the next two years," including mass sackings.

The 2014 deal was preceded by 750 job cuts, enforced by the RTBU. It was struck the year after the Liberal-National government separated regional and city train services, creating the Sydney Trains and NSW Trains departments. This move, aimed at preparing the ground for wholesale privatisation, was followed by the elimination of a quarter of all station staff between 2013-14 and last year. Over the same period, just 22 more train driver and guard positions were created, despite a major increase in train use, including an 18 percent spike last year alone.

The RTBU's role in enforcing these restructures was a continuation of its close collaboration with state Labor governments between 1995 and 2011, as they corporatised the rail service, closed dozens of rail facilities and privatised state-owned freight services.

The gutting of the rail system has created a sharp deterioration in conditions facing railway workers. Train drivers have reported that they are frequently forced to work shifts of over 10 hours, with just a single break. In some cases, they work 12 consecutive shifts a fortnight, with intervening breaks sometimes less than 11 hours. Drivers have reported increasing fatigue and stress.

At the same time, the introduction of a new timetable by the Liberal-National government last November and staffing cutbacks have resulted in repeated breakdowns of the network, with widespread delays and service cancellations over the past weeks.

The degradation of rail infrastructure has created safety hazards for rail workers and millions of commuters. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported today that Transport for NSW documents from 2016, obtained through a freedom of information request, indicate major fire dangers across the network.

The documents reportedly acknowledge that 200 fires occur each year across the Sydney rail system, and warn that "where fires occur in the underground network, the consequences have the potential to be catastrophic." The documents single out Town Hall station, one of the city's busiest, as particularly dangerous, including because there are "no smoke exhaust or ventilation systems."

The record of the RTBU makes clear that railway workers can only fight the intolerable conditions they confront through a rebellion against the union. Independent rank-and-file workers committees are needed to coordinate the strike and combat the attempts by the union, the government, the media and entire political establishment to suppress any stoppage.

Rail workers cannot defeat this conspiracy alone. Appeals should be issued to bus drivers, who confront the government's privatisation of inner-Sydney bus services this year, freight staff, ferry crews, and other sections of the working class in Australia and internationally, for a coordinated campaign against the onslaught on workers' conditions, wages and social rights.

Above all, workers need to adopt a socialist perspective to unify their struggles into an offensive against the capitalist system that subordinates essential social needs, such as proper public transport, to the drive for profit. In opposition to the big business governments—Labor and Coalition alike—the fight must be taken up for a workers' government to implement socialist policies, including an efficient, low-cost public rail network and decent pay and conditions for rail workers.

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