

Australian rail workers, bus drivers and commuters support NSW train strike

Our reporters
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In discussions with Socialist Equality Party campaigners, dozens of rail workers, bus drivers and train passengers have expressed strong support for the scheduled January 29 strike of 9,000 Sydney and New South Wales (NSW) train staff.

Rail workers voted for the stoppage as part of a protracted dispute over a new workplace enterprise agreement. Train crews, station staff, cleaners and other workers are opposing the state Liberal-National government's real wage cuts, increased workloads, and attacks on working conditions.

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), which covers the train staff, is working with the government, Unions NSW and the Labor Party opposition to prevent the strike. The unions are holding back room discussions with government ministers aimed at reaching a sell-out agreement. The union officials are terrified that the stoppage could become the focal point of a broader movement of the working class against the assault on jobs, wages and conditions enforced by the unions and successive Labor and Coalition governments.

Workers who spoke to the WSWs over the weekend voiced hostility to the manoeuvres of the union bureaucrats, and outlined the conditions they confront as a result of decades of sackings and cutbacks.

The rail authorities have subjected train workers to an anti-democratic gag, supported by the RTBU, to stop them speaking publicly on the dispute, so they asked that their comments be published anonymously.

At a busy station, one rail worker with seven years' experience said working conditions were a central issue. "I regularly have less than 12 hours between shifts," he said. "My family celebrates when I get a day off, let alone a full weekend. Since I started I've seen increased workloads, less time off and more decisions being made that make life harder for people on the ground level.

"What we have now are bare-bones operational staff, with drastically increased levels of middle management. There have been job cuts in every area that I'm familiar with. The number of people actually doing work goes down, their workload increases, and they have more people employed on

high salaries telling them what to do."

The worker was scathing about the RTBU's record. "The unions have failed miserably," he commented. "I am not affiliated with any union because I've seen them fail time and time again." He feared "that the unions will come up with some bullshit deal with management, so that they all win, and the things that we on the ground level are actually wanting will be overlooked."

At Sydney's Central Station, another rail worker denounced the government's 2.5 percent per annum public sector pay cap. "It's nothing, because the cost of living is going up," he said. "Petrol is getting more expensive, housing maintenance, water bills, electricity, everything. The politicians don't know what real life is like for the ordinary worker."

The worker spoke out against ongoing moves to privatise rail services. "They're privatising everything, including schools, transport, even housing. These services should be publicly owned. They should be there for working people."

He expressed suspicion toward RTBU officials, stating: "I have seen some of my colleagues who went into the union and won executive positions. The union is looking after them and I have seen the changes in their attitudes and behaviour. Once they become a secretary or higher up, they look down upon us."

Near Newcastle, north of Sydney, a young rail worker said the state transport minister had spelt out the motivation of the government's attacks on train drivers. "He said they wanted everything gone, and they wanted to get rid of the drivers by having fully automated trains.

"What I've seen over the past months is that the timetable has been changed, the rosters have been changed and people are being fired left, right and centre. They're cutting down and cutting down. That is why the railways are in crisis."

The worker rejected claims that the stoppage was primarily over wages. "Our issue isn't the money," he said. "That's how it's being painted in the media, but it's just one aspect. The main problem is that nothing is working and jobs are being destroyed."

Asked about the impact of job destruction, he commented: “The problems resulting from understaffing are being blamed on drivers and station staff when we have done nothing wrong.

“We are all working hard, ridiculously hard. Last week, many of us were working between 24 and 36 hours overtime. Some people worked more than 70 hours in a week. But we can’t tell people about this, because we’ve been gagged with the backing of the union. I could get fired just for telling you all of this.”

At a major station in Sydney’s western suburbs, only three staff, including a manager, are on duty each shift. One station worker said: “We should strike. Yes! There are three issues: wages, timetables and respect.”

The station also serves as a bus interchange, where private companies operate the buses. Transdev, formerly Veolia Transdev, a French-based conglomerate, runs red express crosstown buses under contract to the state government’s Transport for NSW.

A Transdev driver commented: “It’s good to strike. Why not? The trouble on the trains has been going on for 15–20 years. It’s not just the latest timetables. The unions do deals all the time that cut our conditions. We have the same problems with timetables that we just can’t meet.”

Another bus driver supported the strike. He was employed by Punchbowl Bus Company, which has a five-year government contract to operate the bus services across a wide area of southern and western Sydney.

“I get less than \$1,000 a week, unless I do overtime,” he said. “That income is too low to live on. Look at the price of houses around here. They now average around \$600,000. That’s about \$700 a week in mortgage payments. We can’t survive, we have nothing! I am working up to 50 hours a week, on shifts of 8 to 12 hours.”

The driver showed the WSWs his worksheet for the day. He was working from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m., a total of 11 hours, but being paid for only nine hours, because he had two unpaid meal breaks.

Passengers voiced sympathy and support for the planned strike. One commuter, who asked to be anonymous because she works for a company that supplies services to Sydney Trains, said she had some idea how bad the conditions were for rail workers.

“When we talk to the Sydney Trains administrative staff, they tell us they have been moved to a new ‘hot office’ where there are not even enough seats to sit on. If that’s happening to office staff, I can only imagine what’s happening to train drivers. The admin workers do rostering for the train drivers. Sometimes they have to work from the lunchrooms. These are people who have worked there for years and years, had their own desks, and now they have

nowhere to sit!

“I get the train every day. When it took me two hours to get home the other day, when the system broke down, what I found really offensive was Sydney Trains blaming workers, saying they couldn’t staff the trains because the workers were calling sick. I was so angry at that! Number one, because you should not work if you are sick. Number two, why is staffing the workers’ problem?”

“No one asked me about the new timetables, and I travel on trains about three hours a day. Nobody asked me what changes I wanted. Now I have to change trains every day. So the timetables certainly haven’t made it better for me. And the trains are much more packed. It’s time for a strike because nothing has improved for 20 years.”

“It starts with the railways, and it just keeps going. We are all supposed to work harder for longer hours. You can’t claim any overtime and the employers expect one person to do three people’s jobs. Maybe, we won’t take it lying down anymore.”

Another daily train user, Ken, a construction worker, commented: “It’s the government that’s at fault. It’s the lack of resources... The government is not employing more people. It’s cost-cutting... They’re privatising the buses and the trains might be next... And the cost of living is going up, but no one is getting a pay rise.”

Keith, a former public servant and regular passenger, said: “Station staff are now being asked to do tasks they are not paid for, and there’s no one at the stations to assist passengers. I support the workers 100 percent, to get better conditions for themselves and for future workers who want to get a job in that industry.”

Commenting on the role of the trade unions, Keith said: “Some time we might have to put the cleaners through the unions too ... We’re not sure whether they are unions anymore, or part of the business. It’s hard to differentiate now.”

Keith pointed to deepening social polarisation internationally: “You can’t have 1 or 2 percent in control of the whole world and the financials of the entire planet. You have 1 to 2 percent rich and a whole lot in poverty.”



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