

# Australia: Workers reject union-government attempts to cancel NSW rail strike

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Train workers today overwhelmingly rejected an attempt by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) to cancel a January 29 strike that will involve up to 9,000 drivers, guards and staff across Sydney and the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW).

The RTBU sent out a union text message last night asking members if they wanted to abandon the stoppage based on an enterprise agreement offer from the state Liberal-National government. Workers took to social media last night to denounce the sell-out deal, which was drawn up in backroom negotiations between bureaucrats from the RTBU, other unions, the state-umbrella organisation Unions NSW and the government.

This afternoon the union announced that just 5.9 percent of some 6,100 rail workers who received the text voted to call off the strike. The agreement was a desperate attempt by the unions to suppress widespread opposition among train workers, and to force through the sweeping cuts to wages and conditions demanded by the government, the Labor Party and the corporate elite.

The fact that the RTBU even contrived a ballot indicates its fear that workers would have rebelled if the union had simply called off the stoppage. Workers were supposed to vote on the basis of the prospective agreement yesterday evening, without having even been provided a copy of it. The anti-democratic character of the “vote” was underscored by the fact that numbers of workers this morning had not received a text.

The “summary” of the agreement provided to workers had just three pages. It consisted of a title page, two maps of the Sydney and NSW rail network, and six dot points supposedly outlining elements of the deal. Enterprise agreements are complex legal documents, often running to hundreds of pages, with each clause potentially having major implications for workers’ jobs, wages and conditions.

In other words, workers were kept in the dark and told to vote blind. The union’s announcement was timed to prevent any discussion among workers, and put maximum pressure on staff, who have been subjected to vicious attacks by the

corporate press, the government and the Labor Party opposition for daring to vote for strike action.

According to the scanty summary, the deal provided for wage rises of just 2.75 percent per year. Amid a rapidly rising cost of living, this is barely above the inflation rate, and less than half the 6 percent pay increase that workers are demanding.

However, this paltry pay offer, along with a \$1,000 bonus upon ratification of the agreement and extended travel passes, was presented as the “carrot” in the agreement. The government stated that it only offered a raise of .25 percent above its public servant pay cap of 2.5 percent, in exchange for increased “productivity” savings, i.e., even deeper cuts to jobs and conditions.

Virtually no details were provided of the “stick,” and they were couched in the obscure jargon of rail management. The summary declared that the union would accept “Frontline Management Changes,” tightened restrictions on sick leave, and other changes that were not elaborated.

The summary did not even pretend to address the onerous conditions facing rail staff, which were the chief impetus behind the overwhelming vote earlier this month for strike action.

There are dire staffing shortages, resulting from decades of job cuts enforced by the union and an effective hiring freeze since 2014. The new Sydney Trains timetable, which places greater demands on workers, including hours of enforced overtime, is still in place. Rostering arrangements that force train drivers and other staff to work up to 12 consecutive days a fortnight have not been altered.

The RTBU again signalled that it will facilitate the establishment of the government’s privately operated Metro trains system in 2019, which is widely viewed among rail workers as a prelude to the privatisation of the entire Sydney network and mass sackings. In comments to the press today, RTBU state secretary Alex Claassens indicated that the agreement would include “redeployment” provisions, in the event of privatisations.

The rejection of the union’s attempt to cancel the strike

underscores the determination of rail workers to fight against the onslaught on their rights and conditions. However, it is not enough for workers to vote down union proposal to call off the strike. Left in the hands of the unions, this campaign inevitably will be sold out and more onerous conditions imposed.

Claassens declared this afternoon that he would seek further negotiations with the government tomorrow, to strike a revised agreement. The union's attempt to force through the cancellation of the strike on the basis of last night's "offer" makes clear that any deal stitched up tomorrow will do nothing to address the major concerns of workers.

This afternoon, the Liberal-National state government launched legal action in the Fair Work Commission, the pro-business federal industrial tribunal, to have the strike banned. In this, the government is making use of anti-strike provisions contained in Fair Work legislation, passed by the previous federal Labor government with the full support of the unions. A private law firm has also initiated a separate case demanding that the strike be prevented.

The government's recourse to Labor's industrial laws underscores the fraudulent character of the union's claims that the attacks on rail workers are solely a product of the right-wing policies of the Liberal-Nationals, which would supposedly be altered by the election of state and federal Labor governments.

NSW Labor governments, in office between 1995 and 2011, spearheaded the corporatisation of the rail service, closed dozens of rail facilities and privatised state-owned freight services, in collaboration with the RTBU.

More recently, the 2008 enterprise agreement facilitated the Labor government's demands for the axing of 417 rail jobs. 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 agreement led to 750 job cuts, enforced by the RTBU. It was struck the year after the Liberal-National government separated regional and city train services, creating 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.

The RTBU, along with the entire political establishment, is terrified that the present dispute threatens to become the focal point of a broader movement of the working class against the imposition of falling wages and attacks on conditions aimed at rolling back the clock to the 1930s.

The RTBU, the Labor Party and the corporate elite they defend, fear that the struggle of rail workers could break out of the framework of union-company-government enterprise agreements, which have been used to suppress working-class

struggles and enforce the dictates of big business.

The conditions confronting rail workers are replicated in every other industry, as a result of decades of union-enforced cutbacks. Wage growth is the lowest in almost 60 years, registered at just 1.9 percent in 2017. The gulf between rich and poor is widening, exemplified by the fact that the richest 1 percent of the population controls more wealth than the poorest 70 percent.

Rail workers can defend their basic rights only through a break with the RTBU, and the establishment of new organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees. In doing so, workers must be prepared to confront the full weight of state and federal governments, the industrial courts, hysterical media denunciations, and the desperate attempts of Labor and the unions to sabotage a genuine struggle.

This can be combated only by a turn to other sections of the working class in Australia and internationally confronting similar attacks. These include bus drivers facing the privatisation of Sydney's inner-west services, freight train workers facing similar union-enforced attacks on wages and conditions and ferry staff confronting onerous conditions after the privatisation of Sydney's fleet.

Such a struggle needs to be based on a new political program, which rejects the subordination of transport, infrastructure, along with workers' jobs, conditions and every aspect of social life, to the profit dictates of an ultra-wealthy elite, enforced by Labor, the unions and the entire political establishment. This means the fight for the establishment of a workers' government, committed to socialist policies, including placing the banks, corporations and transport under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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