

Australia: Government-union “negotiations” stall in NSW rail dispute

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A meeting yesterday of around 150 union delegates covering Sydney and New South Wales (NSW) rail staff rejected an “offer” by the state Liberal-National government for a new enterprise agreement containing marginal pay increases and enforcing a continued assault on workers’ conditions.

The meeting was held at the Sydney headquarters of Unions NSW, the state umbrella organisation. The delegates assembled amid ongoing attempts by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and other unions, to prevent a strike and push through a sell-out agreement with the government that would intensify moves to privatise the rail network and impose further “productivity savings.”

The delegates meeting was called following a January 25 ruling by the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the pro-business federal industrial tribunal, banning a scheduled January 29 one-day strike of 9,000 rail workers throughout the state. It was a highly political ruling, handed down amid fears in ruling circles that the rail workers’ struggle could become the focal point of a broader movement of the working class against the onslaught on wages and conditions.

The FWC outlawed all industrial action by train staff for six weeks, including overtime bans and the wearing of union badges.

RTBU state secretary Alex Claassens responded by declaring the union would “always abide by Fair Work Commission rulings” and entered into further negotiations with the government that afternoon. The following day, January 26, Claassens told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation a deal had been reached that would “sort out” conditions and be presented to a delegates meeting. He said he thought the delegates would agree to put the offer to members, because it was likely to be best they were going to get.

Claassens’ response to the FWC ruling, and his announcement of a new offer, were desperate attempts to sow illusions among workers, and keep them straitjacketed within the framework of the industrial courts and enterprise bargaining. These are the mechanisms that the unions, the Labor Party and the employers have used for decades to suppress workers’ struggles and impose the dictates of big business.

These efforts received a blow yesterday. The government followed through on earlier declarations that it would “stare down” rail workers and remain intransigent. Delegates told WSWS reporters before the meeting that rail workers would not accept any offer comparable to the previous deal they rejected in a union text message ballot on January 23.

Far from “sorting out” conditions, the new offer was reportedly identical to the one repudiated in the text message ballot. That agreement provided for wage rises of just 2.75 percent per annum, barely in line with the rate of inflation. The 0.25 increase on the public sector wage cap of 2.5 percent per annum was, the government stated, offered in exchange for “productivity savings,” i.e., deeper cuts to working conditions.

For the text ballot, all that workers received was a supposed one-page summary of the deal. It said the union would agree to “efficiencies” but provided no detail. One delegate told the WSWS yesterday that a clause allowing “Frontline Management Changes” could “mean anything,” including the mass sacking of station staff.

Delegates also said the agreement would address none of the onerous conditions workers confront. These include drivers being forced to work up to 12 consecutive shifts per fortnight, forced overtime and onerous rosters, due to staffing cuts and an effective

hiring freeze across the Sydney rail network since 2014.

Workers also have expressed fears that the government's introduction of a privately-owned Sydney Metro to take over some city rail services will be the opening shot in the government's stated plans to sell off the entire network.

Events at the delegates' meeting indicated mounting frustration with the sordid manoeuvres of the unions. After two hours of closed-door delegates' discussions, Transport for NSW head Howard Collins was given the platform to outline rail management's unchanged offer, which delegates denounced for almost two hours. Collins' presence was intended to deflect growing suspicion of the union leadership's role, by letting-off steam at rail management.

At a press conference after the session with Collins, and while delegates continued to meet, Claassens made clear the union leadership would continue to press for a sell-out agreement, and uphold the strike ban.

Asked by a WSWs reporter whether the union would call mass membership meetings, Claassens invoked the FWC ruling, saying it would be "difficult because to do that you have to shut the system down and, as you know, I'm under the rules of the Fair Work Commission."

The union is doing everything it can to keep workers in the dark. A number of delegates told the WSWs they had little knowledge of what was being discussed between the RTBU and the government. The previous one-page "summary" contained just six dot points, denying workers the right to scrutinise the deal's contents before voting.

Significantly, the union shut down the comment feature on its "RTBUNSW" Facebook page on January 29, preventing workers from voicing their opinions and engaging in discussion. The union claimed, without any substantiation, that the site was closed to ensure compliance with the FWC judgment.

In reality, the move followed a string of comments denouncing a union post on January 25, after the ruling, which told workers they "must work overtime as they normally do" and "must" not take strike action on January 26.

During the press conference, Claassens said the union would enforce the FWC ruling to prevent any further industrial action. Asked whether the union would ever

consider defying the FWC, he stated: "No way. I could never do that. I've always followed the rules all my life ... There's no way in the world we are ever going to do anything—while it is in my power—to break the rules of this land."

In other words, while cynically bemoaning the Fair Work ruling for "ending the right to strike," the RTBU will do everything in its "power" to police it. All the unions backed the introduction of the Fair Work legislation by the federal Labor government of Kevin Rudd in 2009. It banned strikes outside "bargaining periods" and included sweeping provisions for even "protected" industrial action to be banned on the pretext that it would harm the economy or public welfare. These powers were used to block the January 26 rail strike.

The unions' continued support for these provisions, which they have used to suppress innumerable workers' struggles, shows that a genuine fight against the government cuts can go forward only through a rebellion against the RTBU and other unions. The conditions confronting rail workers are a direct product of previous enterprise agreements struck by the unions with successive Labor and Liberal-National governments, including deals in 2008 and 2014 that sanctioned hundreds of job cuts.

A struggle against the FWC, the government, the Labor Party and the corporate media requires new forms of organisation, including independent rank-and-file committees. These would be tasked with breaking the isolation imposed by the union and coordinating joint industrial and political action with bus and other transport workers facing privatisation and a further assault on their conditions.

Above all, the gutting of public transport in the interests of an ultra-wealthy corporate elite underscores the need for a new political perspective, based on the fight for a workers' government that would implement socialist policies, including placing transport, the corporations and the banks under democratic workers' control and public ownership.



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