

Australia: Why the RTBU is muzzling railworkers

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In the midst of widespread anger over pay and conditions, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), in league with New South Wales (NSW) transport authorities, is doing everything it can to silence rail workers and prevent them from speaking out publicly.

At the same time, the union is keeping workers in the dark about backroom negotiations with the Liberal-National state government and rail management over an enterprise agreement that will inevitably mean the further destruction of jobs and conditions, and an acceleration of the drive towards privatisation.

Gagging rail workers is aimed at atomising the workforce, preventing any discussion and suppressing an incipient rebellion that the government and the unions fear will become the focal point for broader discontent and opposition in the working class as a whole.

One young rail worker told the WSWs this week that he and others were working, with overtime, up to 70 hours a week. Then he added: “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.”

Other rail workers have told the WSWs the same story: they cannot speak publicly because they could face retaliatory action, including being sacked.

In 2015, Transport for NSW, the state’s corporatised public transport organisation, introduced a Code of Conduct, in order to muzzle workers. Under the Code, transport workers are permitted to “enter into public debate on political and social issues” but potentially face termination if they make any comment critical of public transport.

The Code mandates: “All media inquiries must be referred to the agency’s media unit. Making public comment or releasing information must only occur in

accordance with agency policies and procedures.” And, furthermore, “Opinions on transport agencies and government policies or decisions must be avoided unless required by law.”

The RTBU has never challenged this deeply anti-democratic measure, for the same reason that it refused to challenge the pro-business Fair Work Commission’s decision on January 25 to ban the strike and overtime and other bans for which NSW rail workers voted. The union functions as the industrial policeman for the government and management and exploits these laws and regulations to suppress any independent activity, even discussion, by workers.

On January 29, in a highly revealing action, the moderators of the union’s official Facebook page eliminated its comment section. The RTBU claimed that the decision was to comply with the FWC’s decision, but the real reason was obvious from the groundswell of opposition that was emerging from rail workers.

On January 24 to 25, workers had denounced a desperate union attempt to shut down the January 29 one-day strike in advance of the FWC ruling, through a bogus text message ballot. Union members were supposed to cast a vote on the basis of a one-page summary of their draft Enterprise Agreement (EA), which contained no details of the draconian productivity measures being demanded by the government.

“How are we meant to make an informed decision when we can’t see the whole deal, cuts and all? Or is this EA going to be half a page only?” one worker scornfully asked. “Once again, from both sides, no information on what changes management seek or unions are prepared to agree to,” another declared.

Others warned that the union was seeking to push

through a betrayal. “My message to the RTBU: don’t sell out station staff in NSW trains for a small increase in pay for train crew,” one worker wrote. “Job security is a must you should be fighting for.”

Following the FWC ruling, the union issued a directive on Facebook: “You must work overtime as you normally do after 6pm tonight and you must work as usual on Monday 29 January.” It was after workers reacted angrily to this directive, that the union disabled the ability to comment on its Facebook page.

In cahoots with the other rail unions and Unions NSW, the RTBU called a delegates meeting last week to present an offer that was virtually identical to the one that had been rejected just days earlier in the text message ballot. After hours of discussion, delegates told the WSWs that they were none the wiser about the content of the union-government negotiations, or the content of the deal being discussed.

For the past three decades, the unions, on behalf of big business and in collaboration with Labor and Coalition governments, have stamped out any semblance of democracy in the ranks. The RTBU has no intention of holding mass meetings over the current EA for fear that it would lose control. It is desperately seeking to intimidate and wear down opposition while it keeps workers completely in the dark about the sell-out it is preparing.

The unions are not organisations that in any way defend the interests of the working class. Rather, they have become virtual prisons for workers, aimed at preventing any struggles to defend their rights. Union bureaucrats are, above all, intent on defending their positions in the official industrial relations apparatus, and the very considerable privileges that flow from it.

To fight for their basic democratic and social rights, even the right to speak out, rail workers need to organise a political rebellion against the unions. The Socialist Equality Party advocates the building of rank-and-file committees among rail workers, led by trusted and democratically elected representatives.

The launching of any struggle by rail workers would immediately attract the sympathy of other workers, not only in rail but throughout industry and the public service. It would, however, also face the wrath of the courts, media, the unions and the political establishment, including the Labor Party. Rail workers would need to turn for support to other sections of

workers in NSW, throughout Australia and internationally who face similar attacks.

Such a struggle requires a new political perspective that rejects the profit dictates of the corporate elite: that means the fight for a workers’ government to implement socialist policies, including placing transport, along with the major banks and big business, under public ownership and democratic workers control.

We urge rail workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party to discuss these vital issues.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact