

Australia: Union pushes sell-out deal in NSW rail dispute

Oscar Grenfell
8 February 2018

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) last night announced it had received a new enterprise agreement “offer” from New South Wales (NSW) and Sydney Trains. The deal, hatched in backroom negotiations, is yet another attempt by the union to force through the state Liberal-National government’s demands for sweeping cuts to rail workers’ jobs and conditions.

Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation today, RTBU state secretary Alex Claassens declared that the union was “very close on all the conditions” to recommending the deal.

The agreement is the latest in a series of sordid manoeuvres by the RTBU and other trade unions, aimed at suppressing widespread anger among 9,000 train staff across Sydney and NSW, and preventing their struggle from becoming a focal point for wider working-class discontent.

The unions have enforced a January 25 ruling by the Fair Work Commission (FWC) banning a scheduled January 29 strike and all other industrial action for six weeks. RTBU officials immediately declared they would “always abide” by the anti-democratic decisions of the pro-business industrial tribunal, which was created by the last federal Labor government with the full support of all the unions.

Since the FWC ruling, the RTBU has been engaged in closed-door talks with the government and transport authorities in a bid to strike a sell-out agreement. The union has suppressed all details of these discussions. It is also policing a gag on rail workers speaking publicly on any of the issues they face and has shut down comments on the RTBUNSW Facebook page to prevent workers voicing their growing hostility to the union.

The RTBU’s announcement of a new offer last night followed this well-worn pattern of keeping workers in

the dark. Appended to a brief notice signed by the “RTBU team” is a summary of the offer, barely longer than a page.

The deal appears to be almost identical to a deal rejected by workers in a union-organised text-message ballot on January 24. It mandates wage increases of just 3 percent per annum, barely in line with the rate of inflation and only 0.25 percent above the previous offer of 2.75 percent.

The summary includes commitments by the unions to impose further cuts to conditions, without providing any details. It indicates that the RTBU will accept “reforms,” including a crackdown on medical leave, “Changed notice periods in Deed” and “Frontline Management Changes.” As rail workers previously told WSWs reporters, “Frontline Management Changes” could mean anything, including sackings of station staff.

The rotten character of the deal is epitomised by how workers will be informed. The RTBU notice says management will be “presenting the new offer directly to the workforce via depot meetings,” starting next week. “Stay tuned for their tour details,” the notice states.

In other words, the RTBU, functioning as an arm of rail management, has again dispensed with any pretence of democratic discussion. With its assistance, the management is calling forums whose sole purpose will be to intimidate and silence workers, while creating the conditions for anyone who speaks out to be victimised.

The RTBU’s notice says nothing about when workers will be given the agreement in full. But based on the union’s record, it will likely try to force workers to vote on a complex document, spanning hundreds of pages, that they have not even seen.

The anonymous comments of a rail worker published in the *New Daily* today made clear why the union is silencing train staff. The worker described the offer as “s-t,” noting that a \$1,000 “bonus” touted in the agreement was, in reality, partial back pay for a wage freeze since the previous workplace agreement expired last September.

The RTBU’s claims that it has negotiated an offer that will break the NSW government’s 2.5 percent per annum public sector pay cap were exposed as a fraud by the comments of a spokeswoman for Transport Minister Andrew Constance. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, she indicated today that wage increases above the cap would be recouped through “savings ... to be found in other employee-related areas.” In other words, the union is preparing a sell-out that will include further deep cuts to jobs and working conditions.

This is a continuation of decades of regressive union-brokered agreements that have facilitated mass sackings and continuous restructuring. These have resulted in abysmal working conditions, including chronic staffing shortages, drivers being forced to work up to 12 consecutive days a fortnight and up to 70 hours per week, including enforced overtime, with minimal breaks between shifts.

Any government-union deal will intensify all the attacks contained in previous RTBU agreements. In 2014, the union forced through the last enterprise agreement in the face of substantial opposition. For the first time in decades, the deal removed clauses prohibiting forced redundancies. It also abolished provisions specifying that workers redeployed to new positions retained their previous rate of pay.

The financial press hailed that agreement as a “major industrial victory” for Gladys Berejiklian, the then transport minister and current premier. The government boasted it would result in annual “savings” of \$20 million. The deal was followed by the elimination of a quarter of station staff jobs—over 500—between 2013–14 and last year.

This sellout followed the RTBU’s collaboration with successive NSW Labor governments, in office from 1996 to 2008, in the destruction of thousands of rail jobs, the closure of dozens of facilities and the privatisation of freight services.

Decades of union-enforced restructures have created

the conditions for the Liberal-National government to press ahead with its stated aim of privatising the Sydney and NSW rail network.

Rod Staples, secretary of Transport for NSW, the government body covering public transport, touted its new Sydney Metro network in a *Sydney Morning Herald* comment today. He declared that the privately-owned and operated system, set to begin in 2019, would, “at full capacity,” “run a train every two minutes in each direction under the Sydney CBD.”

While Staples and the government claim the Sydney Metro will “complement” the existing rail network, critics have noted that it will be virtually impossible to integrate the two, so the new service may be the beginning of wholesale privatisation.

The experience of rail workers over the past two decades makes clear that a defence of jobs and conditions can go forward only through a rebellion against the RTBU and a repudiation of its rotten “agreements.” New organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, are required to coordinate a unified fightback by rail and other workers, and combat the attacks of the government, Labor, the corporate press and the unions.

Above all, what is needed is a new political perspective, which rejects the subordination of public transport, along with jobs, education, healthcare, and every other social right, to the dictates of a tiny corporate elite. This means the fight for a workers’ government that would implement socialist policies, including placing transport, the banks and corporations under public ownership and workers’ control.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact