

Australia: Union confirms sell-out agreement in NSW rail dispute includes job cuts

Oscar Grenfell**12 February 2018**

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) confirmed last Thursday that a proposed enterprise agreement covering train staff throughout Sydney and New South Wales—hatched by the state Liberal-National government in backroom discussions with the union—would facilitate job cuts.

The admission is further evidence that the RTBU is doing everything it can to strike a sell-out deal that will intensify the assault on rail workers' conditions and accelerate privatisation measures.

The union announced a new government "offer" in an online statement last Wednesday. Speaking to the media the next day, RTBU state secretary Alex Claassens declared that the union was "very close on all the conditions" to recommending the agreement to rail workers.

The RTBU has touted a meagre wage increase of 3 percent per annum. The reality is that 3 percent is nowhere near the soaring cost of living. In 2017, average national electricity costs increased by 12.4 percent, education costs by 4.1 percent, health insurance by 4 percent, general health care costs by 5.4 percent and petrol by 10 percent.

The real purpose of the marginal pay rise is to provide the union and the government with a pretext for imposing cuts to jobs and conditions. Last Thursday, NSW Liberal-National Premier Gladys Berejiklian made clear that the 0.5 percent increase above the government's public sector wage cap of 2.5 percent per annum was in exchange for unspecified givebacks.

"If any class of employees want more than that they have to give things up—and that's what's happened in this case," Berejiklian stated. The premier confirmed that this included further job destruction, to which the union had agreed.

RTBU NSW secretary Alex Claassens effectively

confirmed this, telling reporters. "I don't want to see any job cuts. I would love it if they got their numbers all wrong and we didn't lose anybody. But I am confident there is a range of conditions in these documents, now, which give us a measure of protection."

Explaining Claassens' comments, an article on *news.com.au* stated last Thursday: "The Rail Tram and Bus Union accepted there would be job cuts when new technology was introduced but believes the latest offer requires proper consultation."

The sudden announcement that job cuts are part of the deal is an indictment of the backroom manoeuvres of the RTBU. Throughout the dispute over a new enterprise agreement, the union has done everything it can to keep rail workers in the dark.

The RTBU enforced the ruling of the Fair Work Commission banning a scheduled January 29 strike and all other industrial action. As in countless disputes, the unions have invoked the judgment by the pro-business industrial tribunal—which was created by the previous federal Labor government with the full support of the unions—to prevent any independent political and industrial struggle by workers.

Over the past weeks, the RTBU has engaged in closed-door negotiations with the government and NSW transport authorities to work out the terms of a betrayal. Rail workers have been told nothing about what has been under discussion.

At the same time, the RTBU has sought to muzzle growing anger among workers. It has enforced a Transport for NSW gag preventing workers from speaking on any aspect of the dispute, and shut down comments on the union's Facebook page last month, after a number of workers warned against the preparations for a sell-out. The RTBU also has refused

to call any mass meetings.

The reason for the union's anti-democratic conduct is clear. It does not want workers to know what it is preparing to enforce on behalf of the government and big business. Claassens and the RTBU have given no indication of how many job cuts they have agreed to, in which areas, or over what time frame.

The bare one-page summary of the agreement provided to workers last week makes no mention of job destruction. Instead it indicates that the RTBU will agree to "Changes to Frontline Management" and other unspecified cuts to conditions. Enterprise agreements are complex legal documents often spanning hundreds of pages, with each clause potentially holding significant implications.

Previous sell-out agreements struck by the RTBU give an indication of the scale of the job cuts on the agenda. The 2008 deal 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 enterprise agreement removed clauses prohibiting forced redundancies, and abolished provisions requiring that workers redeployed to new positions retain their original salary. The RTBU forced through the deal in the face of substantial opposition, with up to a third of rail workers casting a ballot against the sell-out.

The 2014 agreement was hailed by the financial press as a "victory" for Berejiklian, then transport minister, while the government said it would "save" more than \$20 million per year. The deal directly facilitated the retrenchment of 500 station staff between 2014 and 2017, roughly a quarter of the total.

The latest enterprise agreements follow decades of union-enforced cuts, including the RTBU's close collaboration with successive state Labor governments, from 1996 to 2011, as they eliminated thousands of jobs, shut down rail facilities and privatised freight services. These betrayals have resulted in the current crisis facing rail workers, including long hours of forced overtime, up to 12 consecutive days work in a fortnight and chronic understaffing.

The RTBU will undoubtedly try to force workers to vote on the latest deal without having the opportunity to read or discuss it. This is why the union has endorsed

rail management's statement that it would "take the deal directly to workers" in depot meetings, which could begin this week. The sole purpose of such forums, presided over by management executives, would be to intimidate and silence rail workers, while identifying those who speak out for victimisation.

The record makes clear that rail workers' should reject any offer put by the RTBU and Transport for NSW. This must be the starting point of a broader rebellion against the union, including through the establishment of new forms of struggle, such as independent rank and file committees. These would be tasked with organising a unified fightback of rail and public transport workers against the assault on jobs, wages and conditions.

Above all, the rail dispute highlights the need for an alternative political perspective. In opposition to the wretched corporatism of the unions, a new program is required that rejects the subordination of public transport, along with every aspect of social life, to the profit demands of a tiny corporate elite. This means the fight for a workers' government that would implement socialist policies, including placing the banks, corporations and transport under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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