

Australian transport workers forum discusses the necessity for a new political perspective

SEP holds online meeting on the New South Wales rail dispute

Our reporter
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Rail drivers, maintenance workers and others employed in Australian and New Zealand public transport industries participated in a wide-ranging online discussion, organised by the Socialist Equality Party on February 11.

The event, which generated animated contributions from those participating, was the first industrial “call-in” online meeting hosted by the SEP in Australia. It was convened to discuss the political issues facing rail workers in New South Wales (NSW), who are currently involved in a long-running and bitter “enterprise agreement” dispute over wages, working conditions and jobs, along with further government steps towards the privatisation of public transport.

Currently, the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and other public transport unions are enforcing a Fair Work Commission ruling, issued in late January, outlawing all industrial action by rail workers. The union has shut down comments on its Facebook page and refused to call any mass meetings, even as it continues its back-room negotiations with rail management.

Warwick, a former longstanding worker at Comeng, an engineering company that used to design and build railway locomotives, rolling stock and trams, chaired the meeting and welcomed those in attendance.

WSWS journalist Oscar Grenfell delivered the opening report, which included a detailed overview of the NSW rail dispute. He explained that the RTBU, together with the state and federal governments and the Labor Party opposition, was determined to prevent it from becoming the focus of a broader movement of public sector and other workers in defence of jobs, wages and conditions.

“Events of the past days,” he said, “have underscored the correctness of the warnings made by the Socialist Equality Party, that the RTBU is doing everything it can to strike a sell-out deal that will accelerate the privatisation of the rail network and the attacks on rail workers.”

“The RTBU has touted the fact that the latest management offer supposedly includes a pay rise of 3 percent per annum. This does not even begin to keep up with the soaring cost of living. In 2017, average 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.

“And the government has made clear that any wage increase above the 2.5 percent public sector pay cap will be paid for with ‘productivity savings’—that is, more attacks on conditions. State

premier Gladys Berejiklian confirmed on Thursday that the meagre wage rise was being offered in order to push through even more job cuts.”

Grenfell commented on two previous enterprise agreements—the 2008 deal with the former Labor government, which axed 417 rail jobs, and the 2014 agreement, which imposed \$20 million in annual spending cuts and created the conditions for some 500 station staff jobs to be eliminated.

“These betrayals were a continuation of decades of sell-outs, including the close collaboration between the RTBU and Labor governments from 1996 to 2011, which saw thousands of railway jobs destroyed, maintenance facilities and depots closed and the privatisation of state-funded freight services.”

This record, Grenfell said, demonstrated that workers could not take a single step forward within the framework of the union. They had to establish new, democratically controlled organisations of struggle based on a socialist perspective.

Pat, a rail freight driver, responded strongly to this assessment, explaining the union’s divisive role at his workplace. “The RTBU does not unite workers on an industry basis, but splits them from workplace to workplace. Sometimes depots that are almost working next to each other will be working on totally different conditions,” he said.

“For employees who do the same jobs and face the same risks, and who ultimately have the same interests—that is decent paid fulltime work—the system is a sham. It’s a legal hoop-jumping exercise that the RTBU is happy to participate in.

“When the company doesn’t get its way, the RTBU relies on the Fair Work Commission to prevent industrial action from occurring. When the company and the union come up with a new agreement, they tour to the different depots to sell it. Nothing really changes in a process in which workers have no say.”

Chris, a Melbourne-based locomotive driver with a private rail freight operator, was the next to speak. “Workers in the freight industry face seriously deteriorating conditions,” he said.

“Your employment comes and goes, depending on the company winning freight contracts, and there is a constant bidding war between private operators for the haulage of freight. This places workers—not just in my company but, in particular, for those employed with the smaller freight companies—in compromised and dangerous situations.

“Metro Trains in Melbourne,” he continued, “is attempting to push

through as many drivers through their training schemes as quickly as possible. And the union, in conjunction with Metro Trains, has sped up the process, dumbing it down to the point where training consists of sitting in front of a video screen and answering a few questions.”

These processes had been apparent throughout his working life, he said, particularly in Victoria where public transport had been fully privatised.

“In every case the unions’ only function has been to make sure they are involved in the process. In 1993, when Victoria’s Kennett Liberal government was implementing massive restructuring, the unions’ slogan was ‘Negotiate, not dictate,’ and they certainly negotiated. One ex-union official openly stated that the union found \$139 million in cuts for the state government.”

Len, who works in the private maintenance sector of the railways, said that there had been annual redundancies for the past four years at his company and that this was facilitated by the union. “The unions always make sure the job cuts demanded by management are implemented.” He went on to say that the union was continuing to work hand in hand with the company, as it sought to drive down costs and retain future maintenance contracts under a future privatised system.

When workers raised serious safety issues on the shop floor, he said, their complaints were either ignored or dismissed.

“The company has done air toxicity samples around the site and found that the levels are outside the guidelines for clean air. The results have been ignored and the union has failed to hold any meetings in relationship to the samples, which clearly indicate that we are literally being poisoned at work,” he said.

Terry Cook, a retired NSW railway worker and founding member of the Socialist Labour League, the forerunner of the SEP, reviewed some of his experiences at the state-owned Elcar railway workshop in Chullora, where he worked from 1976 until 1991.

Cook said the current conditions facing workers in Australia were the product of an historical assault by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments extending from 1983 to 1996. Under the ALP-ACTU Accords, these governments deregulated the economy and created the conditions for the sacking of thousands of workers in every basic industry.

“What was carried out by the Reagan administration against the US working class in the late 1970s and early 1980s was implemented here by the Labor governments,” Cook said.

“This involved the dismantling, disciplining and smashing up of the most militant sections of the working class, a task that was carried out by the so-called ‘left’ unions under the control of the Stalinist Communist Party...”

“Young people coming into the workforce today need to know this history, and about the situation that existed when my generation entered the workforce. Today there is no framework for democratic discussion in the unions, or in your workplace, to talk about your conditions, wages and jobs.”

Cook warned that it was not possible to “rebuild the unions” to serve workers’ interests. These were no longer workers’ organisations in any sense, he said, but thoroughly corporatised institutions that defended the capitalist profit system. “You can’t bring life back into a corpse, which is in an advanced stage of putrefaction,” he added.

Chris, a rail worker from New Zealand, recounted some of his experiences with the Rail and Maritime Trade Union (RMTU) and Transdev, a French multinational company, which operates public transport systems in Wellington and Auckland. They were remarkably

similar to those of his Australian counterparts at the meeting.

Tom Peters, a WSWs journalist in New Zealand, pointed to the divide and rule methods used by the RMTU and stressed the necessity for the unification of Australian and New Zealand workers. He explained that there were currently two public transport disputes with Transdev, which involved attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions.

These disputes were happening simultaneously, he explained, and there was enormous anger among workers. But the RMTU opposed any united action by its members.

“The union is determined to keep these dispute separate, despite the fact that it is the same employer in both cities, and the same union. These attacks are being overseen by Labour Party controlled councils.”

Peters reviewed the record of the union’s collaboration with the Labour government during the 1990s, when thousands of rail workers’ jobs were destroyed and the entire rail network was privatised. The unions, which insisted that workers had to remain tied to the Labour Party, prevented any struggle against this onslaught by the Labor government, he said.

Summing up the broad-ranging discussion, SEP national secretary **James Cogan** noted the similarity of the political experiences of those participating. This reflected, he said, the growing determination of workers internationally to fight, the retrogressive role played by the unions, and the political problems confronting the working class.

Workers in NSW rail and elsewhere had demonstrated their determination to fight, Cogan declared. However, what was necessary, he insisted, was the establishment of independent rank-and-file organisations, democratically controlled and based on an understanding that the source of the problem facing the working class was the capitalist profit system itself, and the necessity for a workers’ government, based on a socialist program.

“Today’s meeting,” he said, “represents an important beginning in what we envisage will be the framework for an ongoing discussion on political perspective; on how workers—not just in rail, but in every industry—can defend their jobs, living standards and basic rights.”



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