

Australia: The 2014 union sell-out of NSW rail workers

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A week and a half after declaring it was “close on all the conditions” to recommending the state Liberal-National government’s latest proposed enterprise agreement covering New South Wales (NSW) train staff, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has adopted a stony silence.

Since confirming on February 15 that the deal included further job cuts, the union has issued no press release on the progress of its “negotiations” with the government. Rail workers have told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters they know nothing of the ongoing backroom moves by the RTBU to finalise another regressive agreement.

Meanwhile, the RTBU is continuing to enforce a ban on all industrial action by rail staff, imposed last month by the Fair Work Commission, the pro-business industrial tribunal created by the previous federal Labor government with the support of the unions. The RTBU is also overseeing an anti-democratic gag that prevents workers from publicly discussing the dispute. To block workers’ objections, the union has disabled comments on its official Facebook page, and ruled out any mass meetings.

The union’s actions are a warning that it is preparing to impose a rotten deal that will intensify the assault on rail workers’ jobs, wages and conditions, and accelerate the privatisation of the NSW train network.

While the RTBU has said virtually nothing to rail workers about what it is prepared to accept, the last enterprise agreement covering NSW and Sydney train staff gives an indication of the scale of the cuts being discussed.

The RTBU pushed through the 2014 enterprise agreement for Sydney and NSW Trains in the face of substantial opposition. The deal abolished clauses that had been in every previous agreement over two

decades, prohibiting forced redundancies and mandating that any workers redeployed must maintain their original salary.

The removal of the two clauses was essential to the Coalition government’s broader offensive aimed at completing the corporatisation of state rail services begun by previous Labor governments, in preparation for the sell-off of the entire network.

Before the ballot of rail workers in September 2014, the RTBU claimed it was not formally endorsing the deal, but merely putting it to members to allow them to decide. This was a sham. Officials from the RTBU and Unions NSW—the union umbrella organisation—pressured workers into ratifying the agreement, saying it was the best possible deal, and if they rejected it, further cuts would be on the table.

Unions NSW assistant secretary Mark Morey, who now heads the body, was heavily involved in promoting the deal. When voting began, he declared the unions had “come to a belief at this point this is the best deal on the table that the government has put to us.”

As during the present dispute, the unions touted the meagre wage rise offered by the government. Morey said the agreement was “not perfect,” but added “in the context of where we are industrially and the pay rise and the concessions we have been able to get out of the rail entities, we just felt we got to a stage where members should have a vote on whether to accept it.”

Alex Claassens, NSW secretary of the RTBU, likewise claimed that, while it was a “difficult decision,” the deal would “protect” working conditions.

In reality, the agreement mandated pay rises of just 3 percent in 2014, 3.1 percent in 2015 and 3.2 percent in 2016, barely in line with the rate of inflation. The government made clear that “productivity savings,”

that is, cuts to jobs and conditions, would pay for the marginal increase above its public sector pay cap of 2.5 percent per annum.

The financial press hailed the agreement as an “industrial victory” for Gladys Berejiklian, then transport minister and now premier. Berejiklian boasted that it meant the end of the “jobs for life culture” on the railways. As a result, the government’s pro-market restructuring would no longer be “hamstrung by this ridiculous clause” preventing sackings and would “save” \$20 million per year.

Management immediately abolished the “jobless unit,” managed by the employment consultancy firm INS. The “unit” was established in 2011, amid a major restructure of the railways, including the splitting up of Sydney Trains and other NSW train services. The unit functioned as a holding pen for workers who refused to take a voluntary redundancy and demanded jobs elsewhere.

Having been demeaned and bullied for up to three years, as many as 200 workers in the “jobless unit” were quickly sacked as a result of the 2014 RTBU sell-out.

More sackings followed. In 2013-14, station staff across NSW numbered 1,918. Last financial year, following widespread layoffs, the figure had been reduced by 26 percent to just 1,408. At the same time, the government has maintained an effective freeze on hiring new drivers and guards in Sydney, with their numbers increasing by just 22 over the past four years, despite a large increase in passenger numbers.

The abolition of the redundancy and salary redeployment clauses was also essential to prepare for privatisation. By mandating that workers could be sacked at whim, or redeployed to slash their pay, the RTBU’s 2014 deal paved the way for endless cost-cutting, which is essential to make the railways an attractive investment.

The 2014 agreement provoked substantial opposition from workers. In Sydney, 2,422 workers, or 36.7 percent of those who cast a ballot, registered a “no” vote. Some 23.6 percent of train staff outside Sydney likewise rejected the deal.

Since then, the anger among rail workers, and suspicion toward the RTBU, has only intensified. These sentiments are not enough, however. What is required is a new strategy, the starting point of which has to be a

complete break from the trade unions, which function as industrial police for governments and management.

New organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file workers’ committees, are needed. No one should underestimate what is involved in waging a fight for decent jobs and conditions: an industrial and political confrontation with the government backed by the media, courts, unions and Labor Party. But if rail workers turn to other sections of workers in Australia and internationally who face similar attacks they will win a powerful response.

Above all, the subordination of transport, and every aspect of social life, to the profit dictates of the corporate elite, poses the need for a socialist perspective. This means the fight for a workers’ government that would implement socialist policies, including placing transport, the banks and corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.



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