

Australian rail union prepares sellout in NSW train dispute

Oscar Grenfell
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The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) is trying to push through a sellout enterprise agreement (EA) in the protracted dispute between 9,000 New South Wales (NSW) and Sydney train workers and the state Liberal-National government.

A post on the union's RTBUNSW Facebook page on Wednesday included vague references to a forthcoming "ballot" on the "Sydney/NSW Trains Management EA." The post gave no details of the vote. It was the union's first public reference to a proposed agreement being put to workers. A RTBU media representative confirmed to the WSWS yesterday that rail management would hold a ballot sometime in March on the deal.

The RTBU official claimed that the union had no position on whether workers should ratify the agreement. This is a cynical fraud and a desperate attempt to prevent an open rebellion by rail workers.

The announcement of a ballot follows the RTBU's stony silence over the past two weeks, during which it made no public comment on the dispute. Over that period, workers told the WSWS the union kept them in the dark, with no information on whether backroom talks were proceeding with the government, and what was being discussed.

At the same time, union officials tacitly endorsed a "roadshow" of meetings between management and workers, in which Sydney and NSW Trains bureaucrats touted their latest "offer," which would intensify the assault on jobs and conditions. RTBU representatives participated in the meetings, but the overwhelming majority of rank-and-file rail workers reportedly boycotted them.

The RTBU had already signalled its fundamental support for the proposed agreement. The union announced on February 7 that it had received a "new

offer" from Sydney and NSW Trains. RTBU state secretary Alex Claassens said the union was "very close on all the conditions" to formally recommending the agreement.

The RTBU touted marginal pay increases contained in the offer. They sought to cover up the fact that any wage rise above the state government's 2.5 percent per annum public sector pay cap would be recouped through "productivity savings," i.e., more cuts to jobs and conditions.

On February 11, Claassens effectively confirmed statements by Liberal-National Premier Gladys Berejiklian that the deal would mean job cuts. Nevertheless, he continued to promote the agreement, declaring: "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."

The RTBU representative who spoke to the WSWS yesterday confirmed that the ballot would be on the February 7 "offer." The scanty details provided publicly when the deal was unveiled indicated that it would include wage rises of just 3 percent per annum, barely in line with the official rate of inflation, and well below the real increases in the cost of living.

The agreement would reportedly commit the union to imposing "reforms," including a crackdown on medical leave, "Frontline Management Changes" and other alterations to conditions.

Station staff told the WSWS that "Frontline Management Changes" could mean virtually anything, including widespread sackings and an end to "home stationing," whereby station staff work in a designated geographical area. Workers could be dispatched to any area of Sydney at the slightest notice.

The union's sordid manoeuvres over the past fortnight are a continuation of its attempts to suppress the struggle of rail workers against the assault on their wages and conditions, and prevent it from becoming the focal point for a broader movement of the working class.

The RTBU has enforced a January 25 ruling by the Fair Work Commission (FWC) banning a January 29 strike and all other industrial action for six weeks. The FWC is a pro-business federal industrial tribunal created by the previous Labor government with the support of all the unions.

After that judgment, the union shut down comments on its Facebook page to prevent any criticism among workers and refused to call mass meetings to discuss the proposed agreement.

The union's actions reflect its role as an industrial police force. In every previous enterprise agreement, the RTBU has forced through substantial cuts to jobs, wages and conditions, in line with the demands of the corporate and financial elite.

The 2014 agreement removed previous provisions banning forced redundancies and requiring that deployed workers retain their original salary. The financial press hailed the sell-out as a "victory" for the Liberal-National government, which said it would save \$20 million per year. The deal facilitated hundreds of job cuts, including the elimination of a quarter of all station staff positions over just three years.

Over the previous two decades, agreements with Liberal and Labor governments alike provided for the closure of depots and other rail assets, the privatisation of freight services and the elimination of thousands of jobs.

Workers need to draw the critical lessons of these experiences. First of all, the enterprise agreement "offer" should be rejected with the contempt that it deserves.

The past decades have shown that a fight in defence of jobs and conditions requires breaking out of the control of the RTBU, along with its fraudulent claims that a Labor government would be a "lesser evil."

New organisations, including independent rank-and-file committees are needed. These would break the isolation imposed by the unions by organising mass meetings and democratic discussion. Such committees would coordinate joint industrial and political action by

rail workers, and other sections of the working class, including transport employees, facing the consequences of privatisation and an unending assault on jobs, wages and conditions.

Above all, the unrelenting attacks on rail workers, and the ongoing moves toward complete privatisation, underscore the need for a new political perspective that rejects the subordination of transport, and every aspect of social life, to the profit demands of the corporate and financial elite. This means fighting for a workers' government, which would implement socialist policies, including placing transport, along with the banks and corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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