

Australian rail union pushes through sellout agreement at Pacific National

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The Rail Train and Bus Union (RTBU) has imposed another regressive workplace agreement covering around 850 workers in Pacific National's (PN) coal and bulk cargo haulage divisions in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW).

The results of the ballot on the enterprise agreement (EA), released last month, show substantial opposition to the union-brokered sell-out. Around 66 percent of workers who voted ratified the deal, while 34 percent registered their opposition. The RTBU was only able to push through the agreement after months of wearing down workers and suppressing anger over years of cuts to jobs and conditions at the freight company.

The RTBU allowed negotiations over a new agreement to drag on for well over 10 months. Late last year, the union called off a campaign of industrial action that workers voted for in September. The union allowed only token bans and stoppages to take place.

The RTBU solicited an intervention by the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the pro-business federal industrial tribunal, to oversee another round of closed-door negotiations to strike a deal that met the company's cost-cutting demands.

In January, ahead of the ballot, the RTBU conducted joint union-management meetings at workplaces across the two divisions. It claimed that these were "to explain the outcome [of negotiations] and answer questions" on the agreement.

The real purpose was to intimidate workers and place maximum pressure on them to ratify the deal. In a bid to suppress any discussion or opposition, the proposed EA was not made available to workers before or during the meetings.

This was in line with the union's attempts to keep workers in the dark throughout the dispute. At no time did the RTBU specify what pay arrangements it

proposed in negotiations, saying only it was seeking "a fair and reasonable wage increase."

The EA provides for a wage rise of just 9 percent spread over 4 years. This is an average of around 2.1 percent annum, barely in line with the official 1.9 percent inflation rate, and well below real increases in living costs for workers.

The union also ensured that repressive conditions outlined in the previous EA continue. The deal includes clauses allowing PN to stand down workers without pay, with as little as two days' notice, if they cannot be "gainfully employed" for "any cause for which Pacific National Bulk Rail cannot reasonably be held responsible."

In other words, employees can be deprived work and pay during scheduled or unscheduled track maintenance, or if there is a shortage of goods available for haulage or incidents prevent the movement of freight.

The EA also retains "lift-up and lay back" provisions that require workers to report for duty before their starting time and to stay back after the end of their scheduled shift for up to two to three hours if the company demands it.

On the pretext of improving rail safety, the new agreement allows the introduction of audio and video monitoring equipment inside locomotive cabins. These devices violate the privacy of workers and will be used against those who oppose the company's cuts to jobs and conditions.

The RTBU fraudulently claimed that the EA addresses widespread opposition to PN's increasing use of contract labour at the expense of fulltime jobs. The union touted a clause that states: "Pacific National shall assure, as far as is operationally practical, that permanent full-time employment shall be the main and

preferred form of employment.”

In reality, the formulation gives the company plenty of scope to restructure the workforce on the pretext of what is “operationally practical”—code for slashing costs to ensure the highest rate of return for PN’s shareholders.

Moreover, the record demonstrates that “permanent fulltime employment” is not PN’s “main and preferred form of employment.”

Pacific National was established in 2002 through the amalgamation of companies created by the privatisation of freight operations in NSW, Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland by state Labor and Liberal governments. PN was acquired in 2016 by a consortium of Canadian and Chinese investors that instigated a sweeping round of job cuts aimed at saving up to \$300 million by 2018.

PN’s strategy is to cull the number of full-time positions, and dramatically increase the use of casuals, who receive few benefits and entitlements. This has created a two-tier workforce, placing downward pressure on wages and conditions across the board.

The RTBU has enforced the casualisation, brokering round after round of union-negotiated voluntary redundancies. In 2014, the RTBU signed off on EAs that allowed the company to increase casualisation to 49 percent of the workforce. Workers were not informed of the provision when they voted on that agreement.

The latest EA will deepen this process, containing clauses that make it more difficult for casuals to obtain permanency. Previously, casuals working the equivalent hours of a full-time employee for six months could apply for a full-time permanent position. That period now has been extended to 12 months.

The union has imposed these cuts by dividing workers at PN, and from other freight haulage companies, and rail and bus employees. This has resulted in the defeat of one section of workers after another in a continuous race to the bottom.

The RTBU is currently working with the NSW state government to try to force through yet another agreement covering 9,000 public rail workers throughout NSW that will intensify the assault on wages and conditions. The union has collaborated with PN and other freight companies to impose sweeping cuts to conditions and jobs in Victoria, Queensland and across the country.

Workers at PN and throughout the transport industry must draw the lessons of their bitter experiences. A fight to defend jobs, wages and working conditions requires a complete break with the corporatised unions and the big business Labor Party that they support.

New organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, are required. These would expose the sordid manoeuvres of the union and coordinate joint industrial and political action by workers across the freight and transport sectors.

Above all, the assault on rail and freight workers underscores the need for a new political perspective that rejects the subordination of transport, freight and every aspect of social life to the profit dictates of the corporate and financial elite. This means the fight for a workers’ government that would implement socialist policies, including placing freight and transport, along with the banks and corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.



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