

Vote “no” in the postal ballot!

Australia: Rail authorities, unions push sellout deal in NSW train dispute

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New South Wales rail authorities, acting on behalf of the state Liberal-National government, and in concert with the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and other unions, last week initiated a ballot of some 9,000 train workers on another regressive enterprise agreement (EA).

The vote, which reportedly concludes on March 18, is an anti-democratic conspiracy hatched by rail management and the RTBU. Since the dispute over low wages and intolerable working conditions began in early January, the union has prevented any mass meetings or discussions among rail workers, including by blocking the comments feature on its official Facebook page.

The RTBU claims it is not advocating a “yes” or a “no” vote. In reality, the union has done everything it can to push through the deal, including by issuing a bulletin to members at the beginning of March stating that “most of the changes to the EA” were “agreed in principle.”

At the same time, the union has used the ballot to prevent a vote by rail workers on launching strikes and stoppages. A Fair Work Commission ruling banning any industrial action for six weeks expired in early March.

The text of the EA makes clear that it is yet one more union-brokered sellout that will intensify the assault on wages and conditions. It should be rejected with the contempt it deserves.

As with virtually every EA, the deal provides for endless pro-business restructuring. Among its aims are to “commit to reform” and “promote a culture of continuous improvement, benchmarking.” It seeks to “provide a mechanism for ongoing change, where required, in order for the Employer to meet its strategic objectives of a ... reliable, efficient, financially responsible and customer focused service.” This means an ongoing reduction of conditions to cut costs and services.

The EA explicitly states that the marginal 3 percent wage rise per annum, well below the real rising cost of living, is contingent on “reforms.” These include an unspecified

“realignment of frontline management across NSW Trains.”

Rail workers have told the WSWS this could mean the further widespread sacking of station staff. Also included is a crackdown on sick leave, forcing workers to provide a medical certificate for any absence of two days, down from three. The deal provides for a single “Rail Operations Centre,” meaning the closure of existing facilities that coordinate the train system, signaling further job cuts.

The EA facilitates the expansion of contract and casual labour across the Sydney and NSW Trains network, which has meant the destruction of full-time positions. The document’s claim that management “will use direct permanent employment” as the “preferred and predominant employment option” is not worth the paper on which it is written.

The deal provides management with all the leeway it requires. It declares that the “employer may engage Employees either on a full-time, part-time, temporary fixed term or casual basis, *in all classifications* to provide *flexibility of employment* and to accommodate *variability of business activity*” (emphasis added). In other words, management can hire casuals in any area, at any time, on the grounds that it is “cost-effective.”

The entire agreement is based on the unstated premise that nothing will be done to address the chronic shortage of train drivers, after an effective three-year hiring freeze, and that guards and station staff will face reduced staffing, after a quarter of station staff positions were eliminated between 2013-14 and 2017.

The sections of the deal covering train drivers and station staff will ensure that the conditions that led to widespread opposition among workers, including lengthy shifts, virtually no time off and enforced overtime, will continue.

The EA features provisions for union-company arbitration, supposedly involving RTBU-orchestrated ballots, which can alter virtually any aspect of the agreement.

A section headlined “Facilitation of changes to the terms

of this agreement” declares that the “parties [i.e., management and the union] acknowledge that continuous improvement, the acceptance of ongoing change and commitment to safety are fundamental to the success of Sydney trains.” To that end, the EA permits union-agreed “changes to working arrangements, conditions and payments” for station staff.

The deal foreshadows the possible abolition of “home stationing”—whereby workers are tied to a specific geographical area—if agreed by the unions and rail management. Staff could be dispatched anywhere on the network, with minimal notice. Other clauses open the door to changing “cleaning staff work locations” and “infrastructure worker shift lengths, rostering and working arrangements.” In other words, virtually all conditions, including those nominally codified in the EA, can be eliminated.

The agreement maintains provisions that give management, and the unions, the ability to victimise and malign workers, including a “Staff Review Process” for station employees and cleaners. The EA features a significantly expanded “disciplinary process,” providing for investigations of workers for 12 weeks or more, and enforced leave without pay for those accused of “serious misconduct.”

The Deed accompanying the agreement makes clear that sackings, on top of years of job cuts, are on the agenda. It explicitly states that management may impose forced redundancies.

Workers whose jobs are being destroyed, and are eligible for voluntary redundancy, have just 14 days to accept such a package, in order to receive a “rail incentive payment.” Employees who wait any longer than two weeks will receive substantially less. Workers who do not want to resign must go through a “priority assessment” period, during which they must seek an “approved permanent position” that is “vacant.”

These details demonstrate why the RTBU, and management, have enforced a gag on train workers’ speaking publicly about the EA, and why they have sought to suppress any rank-and-file discussion.

The RTBU’s March 2 bulletin includes a warning against social media. “Some members,” it cynically states, “find it easier to choose this medium to be their *only* platform to run a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ campaign in cyber space, rather than confronting management directly.” In other words, workers should voice their grievances individually to management and risk discipline, rather than discuss matters collectively, which the union regards as illegitimate.

The bulletin declares that “it is important for all members to exercise their right to vote and to vote without influence.”

This is nothing less than an attempt to prescribe any campaigning or political activity among workers. It is also a monumental fraud. Sydney and NSW Trains have sought to “influence” the vote, by calling sham “depot” meetings to promote the agreement.

These meetings were tacitly endorsed by union officials, who attended them. While claiming not to take a position on the deal, the union has effectively backed it, including by declaring its support for most of the changes, and by wearing down workers for the past three months.

The record makes clear that the RTBU is seeking to push through another rotten deal, as it has in every previous dispute over an enterprise agreement.

A campaign for a “no” vote must be organised as widely as possible. This requires a rebellion against the union, and the establishment of genuine organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees.

Opposing the agreement is just the first step. Such committees must organise mass meetings of workers, and coordinate a unified industrial and political struggle by all rail workers, and other transport employees, including freight staff, bus drivers and ferry workers, against the destruction of jobs and conditions.

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

We urge those workers who agree with this political perspective to contact the Socialist Equality Party to discuss how to take it forward.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
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