

Australia: Unions preside over anti-democratic ballot to sell out NSW rail workers

Oscar Grenfell
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Rail workers have told WSWs reporters they are intensely hostile to a sellout agreement being pushed by the management of Sydney Trains and New South Wales Transport, acting on behalf of the state Liberal-National government.

The deal, on which up to 9,000 workers are voting in a postal ballot set to conclude on March 23, will worsen the intolerable conditions facing train staff. It will accelerate the privatisation of once publicly-owned transport services. The vote, being organised by a private third-party, has been designed to prevent any discussion or mass meetings. Some workers have raised concerns that the result will not be transparent.

Workers also have legitimately expressed suspicion toward the unions, which have collaborated with the government over the past three months to push through the agreement. In an attempt to deflect growing opposition to their own role, some of the unions, including the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), claim not to have endorsed the latest “offer.”

In reality, the RTBU and other unions, alongside management, drew up the latest “agreement” and have repeatedly promoted it. At the same time, they have done everything they can during the past eight months to suppress any industrial or political struggle by rail workers.

The Combined Rail Unions, including the RTBU, entered into closed-room negotiations with the government for a new deal last July, before the existing enterprise agreement (EA) expired. It was only in January, after months of talks, that the unions were compelled, as a result of mounting opposition from workers, to call a ballot on strike action.

After workers overwhelmingly endorsed a January 29

strike, the unions tried to prevent it from taking place. On January 23, the RTBU called a dubious text message ballot on whether workers would call off the stoppage, based on a one-page summary of a new EA. The union indicated it had agreed to unspecified cuts to conditions.

When workers repudiated the “offer,” the Fair Work Commission, created by the former federal Labor government with the full support of the unions, intervened. It banned the strike and all industrial action for six weeks. The RTBU and its union affiliates immediately declared they would always abide by the decisions of the pro-business industrial tribunal.

At the same time, the unions moved to shut down opposition to their sordid manoeuvres. The RTBU disabled comments on its official Facebook page, and refused to call any mass meetings or forums of workers.

On February 7, after further backroom negotiations, the unions announced they had received another “offer” from the government. RTBU NSW secretary Alex Claassens all but endorsed the deal, telling the media the union was “very close on all the conditions” to recommending it. Several days later, he confirmed that the agreement would include job cuts.

In other words, the RTBU’s claim that it is not responsible for the current agreement is a cynical evasion.

Since the ballot began earlier this month, the RTBU has tacitly sought to pressure workers to ratify the agreement. On March 9, Claassens urged workers “to vote and send it back as soon as you can.” The union was not formally endorsing the agreement, he said, but: “That’s not to say the EA and the wage increase along with all the other changes are a bad deal.”

Claassens implicitly warned against a “no” vote. If workers rejected the deal, he said, the effective union-enforced wage freeze, which began when the last agreement expired last year, would continue.

The RTBU’s double-talk was further exposed by explicit support for the agreement by the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), which covers some train workers, and is part of the Combined Rail Unions.

On March 8, ETU state secretary Dave McKinley issued a statement hailing union negotiators for the “remarkable job” they had done to “get to the position we are in.”

“The fact that we have managed to break the government’s long-held 2.5 percent wages cap is outstanding and will be viewed by other parts of the public sector as a great win and precedent,” McKinley declared.

In reality, the wage rise, at just 3 percent per annum, is well below the rapidly rising cost of living. Both the government and the unions have confirmed that the meagre increase above the public sector wage cap will be paid for through “productivity savings,” i.e., further cuts to conditions.

McKinley wrote: “On top of this all of your conditions have been maintained and a number of them enhanced.” This is a lie. The agreement provides for continuous pro-business restructuring, job cuts, “reorganisation” of entire departments, and continued chronic understaffing.

The ETU state secretary also claimed that the deal provided limits on contract and casual labour. The agreement does the opposite. It allows the use of temporary labour across all Sydney and NSW Trains operations, at any time. It states 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.”

McKinley touted “redundancy provisions” in the EA, making clear the unions’ support for further job cuts. He likewise promoted paltry travel and meal allowances, declaring they showed “this is the best outcome that could be attained through negotiations under a hostile Liberal state government.”

McKinley’s comments demonstrate that the Combined Rail Unions are seeking to impose yet another regressive agreement.

In 2014, the unions enforced a deal that removed prohibitions on forced redundancies and scrapped requirements that redeployed workers retain their original salary. The agreement was followed by mass retrenchments, including the elimination of a quarter of all station staff.

This followed decades of collaboration between the rail unions and successive Labor and Liberal-National governments in the destruction of thousands of jobs, the closure of workshops and the privatisation of state freight services.

Workers should vote “no” in the ballot and reject any agreement forced through via an anti-democratic ballot. The repudiation of the sell-out deal, however, is just the starting point.

The record makes clear that workers can only defend their jobs, wages and conditions through a rebellion against the unions. New organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, are required. They would fight for a unified political and industrial campaign by workers across the rail network, along with freight workers, bus drivers and ferry staff, who confront similar attacks on the jobs and conditions.

In opposition to the corporatism of the unions, a new political perspective is required that rejects the subordination of transport, and every aspect of social life, to the profit dictates of a tiny corporate and financial elite. This means fighting 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.



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