

Australian train workers denounce NSW rail sellout

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Workers have taken to social media to condemn the agreement imposed by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and the Combined Rail Unions, covering around 9,000 train staff across the Australian state of New South Wales.

The unions pushed through the sellout deal in a postal ballot that concluded on March 23. The agreement, which will intensify the assault on workers' jobs and conditions, was reportedly passed by a razor-thin margin after a months-long campaign by the unions to suppress widespread anger among rail staff.

In January, the RTBU enforced a ruling by the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the pro-business industrial tribunal, banning a scheduled 24-hour strike and all industrial action for six weeks. At the same time, the union shut down comments on its official Facebook page, to prevent workers engaging in discussion.

After the announcement last Saturday that the deal had been ratified, the RTBU enabled comments for some posts on its Facebook page. The response from workers made clear that the previous commenting block was imposed to prevent them from voicing opposition to the unions' sordid manoeuvres.

Some workers posted comments questioning the transparency of the ballot, and the legitimacy of the "yes" vote.

One worker wrote: "I demand a recount of the votes, did they take into account the people on annual leave?" Another posted: "Considering the voting was done via post & the unreliability of Aus Post (Australia Post), how can we guarantee that all the votes posted back were actually received? I don't believe this was a fair or reliably accurate way to have the vote done especially considering how close the vote was on both sides."

Other workers said they knew colleagues who had not

received ballots. According to figures released by the RTBU, only 52.8 percent of the 6,525 Sydney Trains employees who cast a ballot voted in favour of the deal. Just 50.8 percent of 1,379 NSW Trains workers voted "yes." In other words, the margin in the latter case was just 11 votes.

Comments highlighted the anti-democratic character of the ballot. One worker asked how rail management was "so successful in dissuading the RTBU to forego the usual precedent" of a "proper ballot" presided over by the Australian Electoral Commission, in favour of a "management poll." He said the ballot had been "guaranteed to disperse and dissolve the rank and file's previous resolve. So what happened? Anyone know why we did this?"

When the union's Facebook moderator dismissed calls for a recount, citing provisions in Fair Work legislation, a worker asked: "So are you going to dispute the result or just roll over and play nice for Howard?" Howard Collins is head of Transport for NSW, the department which manages public transport.

Other members denounced the unions' manoeuvres in the lead up to the ballot. One said they had "heard nothing" from union officials when rail management put the agreement to the ballot. Workers were "muzzled by FWC" and "hammered to the point of borderline harassment by ST (Sydney Trains) management."

Another worker questioned the RTBU's claim, before the ballot, that it was not recommending a "yes" or "no" vote. "Why was it that the union chose not to take a position on how to vote?" he asked, adding, "Why did you sit on the fence?"

This comment pointed to the fact that the RTBU's position was a sham. In reality, the union played a central role in drawing up the Enterprise Agreement

(EA) with rail management, acting on behalf of the state Liberal-National government.

Before the vote, RTBU NSW secretary Alex Claassens said the union was “very close on all the conditions” to formally recommending the deal. The union also warned that a “no” vote would result in the continuation of an effective wage freeze since the previous agreement expired last year. The RTBU’s partners in the Combined Rail Unions, including the Electrical Trades Union, explicitly endorsed the deal, declaring it was “outstanding” and the “best outcome that could be obtained.”

In contrast to these lies, workers pointed to the meagre character of the 3 percent annual pay rise touted by the unions as a “victory.” In reality, it is well below the rising cost of living. Some noted that the wage increase was tied to “productivity savings”—code for cuts to jobs and working conditions.

The agreement mandates continuous pro-business restructuring. It includes a crackdown on sick leave, and expanded disciplinary measures, including, in some cases, forcing workers onto leave without pay. It allows for the closure of operational facilities, forced redundancies and the expansion of casual and contract labour.

The deal signals stepped-up collaboration between the unions and rail management. It includes multiple clauses facilitating “changes to the terms” of the agreement in union-management arbitration, to facilitate stepped-up cost-cutting.

In their comments, rail workers pointed to the corporatised character of the unions. One stated: “Well done here RTBU. You’ve effectively done management’s job of causing division in our workforce due to incompetence, although maybe that was the plan all along.” Another said: “I think the upper echelon of the RTBU need to be held more accountable with the way negotiations were conducted.”

Multiple workers indicated they planned to resign from the RTBU. One wrote: “Can you update your RTBU magazine with how to resign from the Union on the back pages not just how to join!”

The sentiments among rail workers are part of a developing rebellion of the working class against the unions, which have suppressed industrial and political struggles for decades.

This sharply poses the question of an alternative. A

number of workers called for the formation of a new union, exclusively for train crews. Others suggested that the way forward was to oust the current RTBU leadership in upcoming union elections.

The bitter experience of rail workers, and every section of the working class, however, makes clear that the issue is not a “bad” leadership, or one inadequate union. Rather, all the unions have been transformed, over the past 40 years, into an industrial police force of governments and big business, and labour hire outfits, serving the interests of a wealthy officialdom.

Taking their pro-capitalist program to its logical conclusion, all the unions responded to the globalisation of production by dispensing with any program of limited national-reformism. They function as the chief proponents of ensuring the “international competitiveness” of their own national industry, through the continuous destruction of jobs, wages and conditions.

The NSW rail unions have collaborated with successive Labor and Liberal-National state governments in the gutting of thousands of jobs, the privatisation of freight services, and the closure of dozens of workshops and facilities.

As the record makes clear, what is required is a complete break with the unions. To prepare for the struggles that will emerge against the cost-cutting outlined in the EA, rail workers need new organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees. These would be tasked with coordinating a unified political and industrial fightback of all rail staff, along with other public transport workers throughout the state and around the country.

Such organisations must be based on a new political perspective, which rejects the subordination of public transport, and every aspect of life, to the profit dictates of a tiny corporate elite. This means the fight for a workers’ government and socialist policies, including placing the banks and major corporations under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.



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