

Australian rail union tries to suppress continuing hostility to NSW train sellout

Oscar Grenfell

30 April 2018

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) is desperately trying to silence widespread opposition to its imposition of a sellout enterprise agreement (EA) last month covering around 9,000 rail staff across the Australian state of New South Wales.

In a membership bulletin, publicly released earlier this month, the union's NSW division issued menacing warnings against "disunity" and the spread of "incorrect information" through "word of mouth" and "social media."

The RTBU's actions are a continuation of its attempts to intimidate and muzzle workers during the nine-month EA dispute with the state Liberal-National government and rail authorities.

In January, the union declared it would "always abide" by the rulings of the Fair Work Commission, after the pro-business industrial tribunal banned a 24-hour strike that had been overwhelmingly endorsed by rail workers. Immediately after the judgment, the RTBU disabled comments on its official Facebook page in a bid to prevent workers from expressing their opposition to the sordid manoeuvres of the union, including closed-room discussions with the government and rail executives.

Once the RTBU reopened comments on its Facebook page, after having pushed through the agreement in a postal vote, it was inundated with dozens of angry comments from workers. Some questioned the legitimacy of the vote. Others denounced the union for colluding with the government in imposing a sell-out.

A number indicated they planned to resign from the RTBU and suggested that workers needed new organisations. 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 RTBU bulletin indicates that such sentiments

have only deepened.

In the bulletin's main report, RTBU state secretary Alex Claassens stated: "I know that for many of you the outcome of the ballot wasn't what you wanted." He sought to blame non-union workers and members of other unions for the passage of the agreement.

In reality, the deal only passed with a razor-thin margin after a months-long campaign by the Combined Rail Unions (CRU), headed by the RTBU, to wear down and dissipate opposition.

To deflect from this, Claassens claimed: "The RTBU NSW is a union led by the membership. This is why at no stage in the ballot process did we endorse a yes or a no vote. It was always up to you, the membership, to decide the outcome of the vote."

This is a fraud. The terms of the agreement were drawn up by the RTBU, with rail management and state government representatives.

In the weeks preceding the vote, Claassens had declared that the union was "very close on all the conditions" to formally recommending the agreement. Then the union issued multiple bulletins, imploring workers to cast a ballot. It warned that a "no" vote would result in the continuation of a wage freeze since the previous agreement expired last year.

Other CRU affiliates complemented the RTBU's position by explicitly endorsing the deal. The Electrical Trades Union hailed it as "outstanding" and the "best outcome that could be obtained."

Claassens claimed in the bulletin that the vote had led to "important discussions" within the union. He warned, however: "We must remember that unity is strength. It's important that we share our feedback so that we can become stronger and more united. But we need to ensure that these debates do not turn into division."

The RTBU head insisted that this would play into management's hands. In fact, the record shows that the union has sought to divide rail workers at every turn. The RTBU fostered divisions between frontline and clerical workers throughout the dispute, in a bid to prevent a unified movement against the agreement, and to divert attention from its own rotten role.

"If we allow the result of this ballot to divide us and weaken us, then we have succumbed to management's tactics," Claassens continued. The suggestion that criticism of the union will aid management, is a thinly-veiled warning that the RTBU will do everything it can to suppress dissent among the workers it falsely claims to represent.

Claassens alluded to the RTBU's real concerns when he stated: "Since the ballot results, there has been plenty of misguided and incorrect information being spread by word of mouth and on social media."

Claassens did not elaborate on the "misguided and incorrect information." Undoubtedly though, he was referencing the exposure of the sellout on the WSWS and the widespread denunciations of the RTBU by rail workers themselves, on Facebook and other social media. In other words, it is illegitimate for workers to voice their opinions, or to communicate, outside the union's control.

Claassens's statements show why the RTBU refused to call any mass meetings during the dispute, and why it censored comments on its Facebook page. The union is terrified of a rebellion of rail workers, after decades of RTBU-imposed agreements that have created dire conditions, including hours of enforced overtime every week, extended shift times and rostering that prevents workers from spending virtually any time with their families.

Claassens's denunciation of "incorrect information" spread via "social media" echoes the statements of union officials in the US and elsewhere.

Union bureaucrats recognise that online discussions and independent Facebook groups established by workers are becoming a vehicle for workers to organise outside the confines of the unions. Recent strikes by teachers across the US have been coordinated mostly through social media, in an incipient revolt against the unions.

Claassens's statements show that the RTBU is acutely aware that the terms of the agreement it

imposed will provoke resistance from rail workers.

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

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

To prepare for the fight against these measures, workers must break with the RTBU. New organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, are required, to coordinate a unified industrial and political campaign of rail workers and other sections of public transport staff facing a similar assault on their conditions, enforced by the unions.

Above all, what is required, in opposition to the corporatism of the unions, is a new political perspective that rejects the subordination of public transport, and every area of social life, to the profit dictates of a tiny financial elite. This means the fight for a workers' government committed to a socialist program, including placing transport, along with the banks and corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact